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WAYFARING STRANGERS: A CASE STUDY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENTAL WRITERS  
IN THE MISSOURI OZARKS

WAYFARING STRANGERS: A CASE STUDY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENTAL WRITERS  
IN THE MISSOURI OZARKS

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English.

By

Robert A. Griffith  
Ouachita Baptist University  
Bachelor of Arts in Communication, 2000  
Missouri State University  
Master of Arts in English, 2003

August 2012  
University of Arkansas

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation describes a year-long ethnographic study of rural basic writers in the Missouri Ozarks. Using Richard Hofstadter's concept of "anti-intellectualism" as a theoretical lens, I explored the attitudes of students towards writing and academic culture. This exploration was conducted by means of questionnaires, interviews, writing samples, and several experimental courses.

Using all these data-collection mechanisms, I was able to identify three characteristics of these students. They were likely to demonstrate a dualistic ("right/wrong") epistemology. Accordingly, they expected their academic reading to make matter-of-fact truth claims. Finally, students were unlikely to understand the transformative nature of any educational enterprise, hoping instead to acquire discrete skills and knowledges that could be used to secure higher-paying, more stable employment.

In addition to describing the study, this dissertation proposes a curriculum for guiding similar students through their introductory writing courses. Following in the footsteps of James Paul Gee, David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, and others, I argue that basic writers need to be introduced to academic discourse through a process of "acculturation." Finally, I explore the ethical implications of both ethnographic classroom research and the acculturation of student groups.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

Dissertation Director:

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Dr. Patrick Slattery

Dissertation Committee:

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Dr. David Jolliffe

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Dr. Robert Cochran

## DISSERTATION DUPLICATION RELEASE

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## Chapter One – Project Outline

### Overview:

The goal of this project is to suggest pedagogical approaches for the composition classroom that consider the unique philosophical and cultural perspectives of rural developmental students in the American Mid-South, specifically the Missouri Ozarks. Using a theoretical lens derived from Richard Hofstadter's seminal study of American antagonism towards education, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, I have investigated the complex cultural, familial, and educational interactions that influence rural students' understanding of the goals of writing classes.

Unraveling the different threads of intellectual influence in these students' lives requires a holistic approach to the student, so I have adopted (and adapted) an ethnographic case study model. Using a number of demographic criteria (income level, age, hometown, etc.), I identified eight male students at the Branson campus of Ozarks Technical Community College who were willing to assist with the project. Over the course of a year, these eight students completed a series of questionnaires and interviews focused on the hallmarks of the anti-intellectual mindset. Additionally, I collected a broad sample of the writing that they did in all of their courses. I also was able to interact with these students on a personal level, engaging often in casual conversation or sharing a meal.

I've gathered this data in the hope that it would help me to answer a number of questions: How has their culture of origin shaped these students' sense of truth? How has that same background shaped their understanding of the purposes of higher education? Does a series of composition courses (some developmental, some not) significantly affect their worldview? If so,

how? The answers to these questions suggest potentially useful pedagogical strategies for engaging these often difficult and defensive students.

### **Context:**

The project was suggested by a variety of factors – demographic, economic, historical, and geographical – that are unique to the area in which I conducted the study. The town of Branson is located in Taney County in the middle of the Missouri Ozarks, a beautiful, mountainous part of the country that has historically been plagued by poverty and illiteracy. In fact, according to US census data, less than fifteen percent of Taney county residents had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2000 (State and County). Similarly, annual per household income in Taney County is \$7,000 below the state average. These figures are not anomalous – they're simply the most recent numbers available. In fact, the economic and educational gap between the Missouri Ozarks and the rest of the state has persisted as long as these data have been tracked – although they have been slowly but steadily narrowing.

Some of this “narrowing” can be attributed to the relatively recent development of a thriving tourism industry in Branson. Although there is a long tradition of live folk music in the area,<sup>1</sup> a favorable Andy Rooney report on the show *60 Minutes* in 1991 prompted Branson's recent boom and has led to the construction of dozens of new theaters. In addition to the theaters, water sports also attract tourists to a string of three local lakes (hence the title “Tri-Lakes Region”) created by the Corps of Engineers in 1959. Recent attempts by local

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<sup>1</sup> Locals are proud of their musical heritage, and one manifestation of this pride is a running dispute concerning which show was the first in Branson. The Baldknobber's Theater dates itself to 1959 and claims to be the first show on Branson's Highway 76, “The Strip” (*Baldknobber's History*). Presley's Country Jubilee, on the other hand, claims to be older, but acknowledges that they came to the theater district later since their shows were originally held in a series of local caves (*Presley's*).

government to expand the area's appeal have led to the construction of three outlet malls, five golf courses, and a lakefront shopping and convention center. Real estate developers have also contributed to Branson's economic upturn by building a huge number of timeshare condominiums and hotels.

This collection of historical trivia is significant to my project inasmuch as it has helped to create one of the nation's most unusual economies. The town of Branson, with approximately 7,000 residents, hosts seven million tourists each year. These tourists have created a local economy entirely reliant on hospitality and entertainment. For the average community college student, this economic reality has had two major repercussions. The first is that although there is plenty of work in town, that work is, almost without exception, seasonal. Since the theaters and vacation destinations close after the Christmas season, the town is basically shut down and deserted from January until the season begins again in March. Recent numbers from the US Department of Labor indicate that unemployment in Taney County has doubled from December to January in every year since 1990 (*Bureau of Labor*). Since most community college students (who, of course, don't have college degrees) work in entry-level positions, this annual spike in unemployment affects a much greater percentage of them.

The second major repercussion of Branson's unusual economy is that the emphasis on the tourism and hospitality industries has created a bottom-heavy job market. To put it simply, Branson is an easy town in which to get a terrible job. There is no shortage of openings for popcorn makers and ticket office workers. Housekeepers and groundskeepers are in high demand. Those jobs, however, don't allow for any possibility of advancement. You can't clean enough toilets and make enough beds to move into management.

The result of all these economic and historical forces is that, in my position as the administrator of a small community college center in Branson, I meet with countless students who are frustrated because they made exactly the same pay in 2011 that they made in 2008. They see no potential to improve their lives or the lives of their children, and they are often embittered by the fact that they feel doomed to a lifetime of degrading work in the service industry.

Of course, someone is making money off those seven million tourists. In fact, the Tri-Lakes area contains at least seven gated, luxury subdivisions, and real estate on any of a number of main roads in Branson has become so valuable that many locals are wealthy simply because the rocky land their fathers farmed has been sold to create another timeshare resort. A flood of retirees, many relocating from the West Coast, have also brought a great deal of money into the area. The result of all this sudden change is an economy divided almost exclusively between “haves” and “have-nots.” There’s very little middle ground, and not many opportunities for people to “jump class.”<sup>2</sup>

Those nearly inviolable economic divisions seem reflective of the Ozark’s topography. It’s a place of winding roads, steep rocky bluffs, and windblown pastures dotted with limestone outcroppings. It’s also a place where the neon lights of the strip, combined with Yakov Smirnoff’s pulsating lasers, create a nighttime glow that you can see for twenty miles. One of the reasons I chose to live in this area was that I could own a few acres within minutes of town and feel completely isolated. Tellingly, I have seen both Yakov’s lasers and a wandering coyote from my back porch. In fact, if you leave the noise and traffic of Branson and head out of town

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<sup>2</sup> This strange juxtaposition of socioeconomic levels was driven home for me one day when I saw a late-model Bentley parked in a handicap spot at Wal-Mart and displaying a bumper sticker that read, “I should never have put this on my credit card.”

in any direction, you will find yourself driving through rugged terrain and dilapidated mobile homes almost immediately. The natural divisions created by ridges, mountains, and a string of long, snaking lakes help to conceal the fact that the “haves” and the “have-nots” are living entirely separate lives within a few miles of each other.

The recent movie *Winter's Bone*, filmed in the Ozarks, illustrates this socio-economic situation beautifully. It's a dark, claustrophobic tale of a young woman's struggle to escape her clannish, methamphetamine-cooking family. The film is unrelentingly grim, and the cinematography emphasizes the isolation the girl experiences as she wanders through the woods, searching for her missing father. It received some critical acclaim and was nominated for a number of Academy Awards including “Best Picture.” For me, however, the most shocking thing about the film wasn't that it showed lives of desperate poverty and drug addiction. I've lived here long enough to know that those lives exist, and I've heard from law enforcement officials that “417,” the area code for southwest Missouri, is a nationally recognized street name for crystal meth. The shocking realization was that the movie was filmed only a few miles from Branson, and that the protagonist's isolation was entirely cultural rather than geographic.

In economic terms, turning “have-nots” into “haves” by increasing upward mobility is one of the chief missions of a community college. As a result, the classrooms at the extension center where I work are filled with twenty-year-olds who are angry that the only viable career option they see is to continue waiting tables. Typically, their hope is that securing a diploma of some sort will enable them to apply for management positions for which they have been overlooked in the past. For most of these students, the intangible benefits of education – all the humanistic goals that teachers hold dear – aren't even part of the equation. They speak frankly

to me of their desire to jump through whatever hoops are necessary in order to secure a more stable, year-round position.

Although students of this type are well represented in our classrooms, they are not the only students we serve. A recent developmental writing class of mine included two silent eighteen-year-olds in cowboy boots and cut-off T-shirts, and a sixty-year-old gay man who was angry about the discriminatory culture of the area. In addition to five or ten middle-class teens who were trying to complete the general education portion of their education while saving money, I had a few singers and the sixteen-year-old child of Russian acrobats, who had just relocated from Las Vegas.<sup>3</sup> It would be easy to imagine that this cocktail of cultures, income levels, and heritages could be incendiary. In practice, however, I have found the mix to be joyful and energizing. That mixture of student personalities and backgrounds is emblematic of the wide variety of services the college attempts to offer to the community. A brief history of the college should illustrate how diverse its goals are.

Ozarks Technical Community College was founded in 1990, when the voters of Springfield, Missouri and a number of outlying communities passed a tax measure to create a new community college district. The district's mission was to provide an open admission, two-year college with an emphasis on technical education ("History of OTC"). In the following decade, OTC would prove to be one of the fastest growing community colleges in the nation. In twenty years enrollment grew from under two thousand to over fourteen thousand. During that same time, the college opened a series of extension centers in Lebanon, Ozark, Branson, and

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<sup>3</sup> Although only sixteen, the student was eligible to take college-level courses because he had received a GED. His GED training was provided by the college free of charge as a community service.



Waynesville. Each of these centers offers a full-service student experience, and students can complete at least one stand-alone degree program.

Much of the college's rapid expansion has been fueled by the addition of a wide range of general education courses. In a partnership with Missouri's four-year state colleges and universities, an Associates of Arts Transfer degree was designed to prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions. This degree proved to be immensely popular for a variety of reasons. Some students welcomed the opportunity to complete the freshman and sophomore years of their degree at a much more affordable price. Others, perhaps underprepared for higher education, were drawn by the automatic acceptance promise of open enrollment. For the college, GenEd courses help to fund the much more expensive technical programs since tuition per credit hour remains the same, but technical programs typically require much more expensive facilities and supplies.

These details of the college's history are important because they help explain its split personality. We train diesel mechanics, bakers, and dental assistants, but we also prepare students for transfer to a university. There is a constant tension between the institution's vocational and intellectual goals.<sup>4</sup> Since most technical degrees require a composition course, this tension is felt in every composition classroom. Some students, who are typically better prepared, are simply savvy consumers interested in affordable local education, and these may aspire to advanced degrees. Others, who are typically very poorly prepared for college, are looking to be trained in a marketable skill, although they may not have any specific skill in mind.

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<sup>4</sup> OTC's Branson Center only offers the AA Transfer degree. This doesn't mean, however, that we don't feel the same tension. Many of our students begin with the GenEd components of their technical degrees (typically English, Math, and a Social Science) before commuting to whichever location houses their chosen program.

For these vocational students, a composition course seems like an unconscionable burden. They ask frequently how they will use MLA citation (to take one example) in their jobs as mechanics or bakers. There are a variety of answers I can give to that question, but they usually prove unconvincing since they are all rooted in my belief that intellectual pursuits are their own reward. For students who want a better job, this high-minded explanation is a difficult “sell.” Usually I evade the issue by telling students that potential employers want them to have these basic academic courses (which is true) and that their degree plan requires it (also true). This is hedging, but it is pragmatic. When students pursue higher education solely to get a better job (which is one definition of anti-intellectualism) they cannot be converted to the “life of the mind” in a fifteen-minute conversation.

### **Theory:**

In the first chapter of his study, Richard Hofstadter makes an important distinction between “intelligence” and “intellect.” Intelligence is to be understood as pragmatic knowledge that “works within the framework of limited but clearly stated goals, and may be quick to shear away questions of thought that do not seem to help in reaching them” (25). Put simply, intelligence is the admirable ability to apply knowledge to a solvable problem thereby creating some practical benefit. Intellect, on the other hand, is by definition not interested in pragmatism. It is the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, so application of that knowledge is not a concern. It may inadvertently solve problems, but it is more primarily concerned with “the critical, creative, and contemplative side of mind” (25). This dichotomy is important to keep in mind because American rural cultures have traditionally been strong proponents of education – but not of intellectualism. In practical terms, this often means that students and their families see

higher education's rightful function in exclusively vocational terms. Or, as Susan Jacoby, whose *The Age of American Unreason* updates Hofstadter's study and more thoroughly politicizes his thesis, put it in a recent interview, "We've always thought of education as good if it gets you a better job, but bad if it makes you think too much" (McNally).

Hofstadter's book is wide-ranging, but the bulk of it is composed of an extended historical study of political and cultural forces that have contributed to middle-America's uniquely anti-intellectual stance. Although fascinating, the sweeping political and historical forces that are described in his book do not directly concern this study. Nevertheless, a brief summary of Hofstadter's argument will serve to prove why a modern community college classroom in southwestern Missouri can be a kind of nexus of those political and historical forces, concentrating anti-intellectual sentiment in some students.

Hofstadter names four forces in his book that can be said to have cultivated anti-intellectual feelings in the American national psyche: evangelical religion, democratic populism, pragmatism, and a particular strain of public education. He argues, citing de Tocqueville, that many of these forces were present in pre-revolutionary America, and are, in fact, key components of the American national identity.

Of the components of our national identity, Christian religion may be said (in varying ways and to varying degrees) to be most significant. We are, after all, a nation initially populated by protestant religious refugees. Although Hofstadter acknowledges that the "tension between the mind and heart, between emotion and intellect is everywhere a persistent feature of Christian experience," so that America can make no exclusive claim to religious anti-intellectualism, he argues that "religion was the first arena for American intellectual life, and thus the first arena for an anti-intellectual impulse" (55). According to Hofstadter, that "tension"

between the mind and the heart began to tip towards emotional understandings of faith very early in the American tradition. Though the connection between the intellectual life and faith had historically been very strong, the great number of lay ministers without formal, academic training caused many early Americans to become mistrustful of educated clergy. An emphasis on personal spiritual experiences and rousing revival meetings furthered this development.<sup>5</sup> It should be clear even from this brief summary that a uniquely American religious tradition was being formed that reflected the second of Hofstadter's four forces, democratic populism.

Just as protestant Americans began to see themselves as able to interact with the divine without need for an intermediary, so these same Americans increasingly thought themselves capable of determining political and economic policy without relying on the advice or expertise of academics in the relevant fields. This approach, of course, was contrary to the tradition established by the "Founding Fathers," who were nearly all, to one degree or another, practicing intellectuals. As an example, Hofstadter cites the shift in public opinion against Thomas Jefferson, who was seen as an example of the dangerous effects of "learning and speculation" (148). Hofstadter's discussion of the campaign against Jefferson is worth quoting in some length because it establishes the intricate interplay of political forces that characterize anti-intellectualism, in particular the negative correlation between politics, religion, and learning that was already forming in the American mindset:

The campaign against Jefferson became at the same time an attempt to establish as evil and dangerous the qualities of the speculative mind. Learning and speculation had made an atheist of Jefferson, it was said; had caused him to quarrel with the views of the

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<sup>5</sup> For a more involved discussion of anti-intellectualism and religion in American life including some analysis of the "Religious Right" of the 1980's, see the eighth chapter of Jacoby's book (183-209).

theologians about the age of the earth and to oppose having school children read the Bible. Such vagaries might be harmless in a closet philosopher, but to allow him to bring these qualities of mind into the presidency would be dangerous to religion and to society. (148)

That correlation was confirmed by the presidency of Andrew Jackson, who campaigned on a populist platform while deliberately advertising his lack of formal education. Since that time, it has been unusual for any American presidential candidate to cite his or her academic excellence as an asset. As Jacoby has argued, even Bill Clinton, who was a Rhodes Scholar, downplayed his intellect to the degree that he was eventually nicknamed “Bubba” (McNally).

If America’s political system contributed to its emerging anti-intellectualism, its economic system did so to an even greater degree. The incredible success of Capitalism, when combined with the American traditions of land ownership and entrepreneurship, contributed to a belief that intellectualism had a negative effect on the workforce. The tendency to see vocational training as the sole worthy goal of education was established early. Hofstadter cites Henry Carey Baird, who ironically was the founder of America’s first publishing firm, as saying that “Too much education of a certain sort ... is productive of an army of mean-spirited ‘gentlemen’ who are above what is called a ‘trade.’” Baird concluded by arguing that the high school system “must be supplanted by the *technical school*” (257-258). Although Baird’s statement is hyperbolic, it is representative of the American mythology of the self-made man who “pulls himself up by his bootstraps.” Clearly the link between economic pragmatism and a conception of education that sees its highest goal as workforce development is strong.

And it is in the realm of education, the fourth of Hofstadter’s cultural forces for anti-intellectualism, that he proves to be most controversial. His discussion of the contributions of

America's professional educators to anti-intellectualism is a bit more complicated since it involves two major movements. The first of these was the decision to promote free, mandatory public education. The high school changed from being a "priceless opportunity to those who chose to take it" to holding a "large captive audience that its administrators felt obliged to satisfy" (327). The decrease in selectivity along with the corresponding increase in enrollment combined to create a situation in which the curriculum had to be adapted towards a more "custodial" and vocational emphasis.<sup>6</sup> During the same period (approximately 1870 – 1930 depending on the school district) a movement in education began that sought to promote the personal development of students rather than the mastery of traditional academic areas. Hofstadter's summary of the proceedings of an N.E.A. committee formed in 1911 to determine the goals and curricular direction of high school is telling: "The task of the high school, the Committee of Nine argued, 'was to lay the foundations of good citizenship and to help in the wise choice of a vocation,' but it should also develop unique and special individual gifts" (333). Rather than admitting that the rapid increase in enrollment had made their intellectual goals unachievable,<sup>7</sup> educators, following in the footsteps of reformers like Dewey, claimed that those goals should be replaced by a child-centered curriculum. Hofstadter argues that in this way the educational establishment abandoned their principles and is partially to blame for our cultural resistance to intellectualism.

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<sup>6</sup> I should clarify by noting that Hofstadter is not opposed to the public high school system – rather, he sees it as the flawed realization of a magnificent ideal. In fact, he acknowledges that it is a "signal accomplishment in the history of education, a remarkable token of our desire to make schooling an instrument of mass opportunity and social mobility" (326).

<sup>7</sup> As an administrator at an open enrollment community college that has seen double-digit enrollment increases for each of the last five semesters, I can sympathize with the plight of these overburdened leaders. A flood of underprepared students can make the normal challenges of education seem unmanageable.

Despite the fact that Hofstadter's book has provoked a wide variety of published responses, none of them are very useful to the development of this study. A brief sampling will illustrate why. In the field of education, defenders of "child-centered" instruction (ala John Dewey) have argued for forty years that Hofstadter misreads the history. On the other hand, Deborah De Simone's "The Consequences of Democratizing Knowledge: Reconsidering Richard Hofstadter and the History of Education," argues that educators should reexamine Hofstadter's critique of progressive education, and understand his argument to mean that "anti-intellectualism and utilitarianism were functions of our American cultural heritage, not necessarily of democracy" (373). In African-American Studies, Robert Cross' "The Historical Development of Anti-Intellectualism in American Society: Implications for the Schooling of African Americans" attempts to connect the theories of Hofstadter and W.E.B. DuBois. In History, an ongoing debate has attempted to determine the validity of Hofstadter's "consensus history," which overlooks divergent cultural forces in favor of a more unified view. John Higham's "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History" placed Hofstadter and many others in this category, arguing that their rendition of history was overly reductive. Others have argued that Hofstadter was a "postconsensus historian" or that his work was impossible to categorize. Thus, in three different academic areas (Education, African-American Studies, and History) Hofstadter's work has been critiqued, categorized, and debated. It has not often, however, served as the impetus for any additional research in applied fields.

This body of scholarship is, ironically, subject to the classic anti-intellectual charge that it doesn't make a lick of real world difference. Hofstadter's ideas, intriguing as they are, have not

been applied to any pragmatic purpose.<sup>8</sup> To my mind, however, they immediately suggested the answers to a number of questions I was facing in my daily interactions with writing students: Why won't certain students respond in the classroom? Why are they so defensive? Why are they so reticent to discuss their stances on matters of faith or morality?

One interaction with a rural student should serve to illustrate their surprising perceptions of academia and academics. At the end of a spring semester, I stopped in the hallway to visit with Jesse, one of the young cowboy boot-wearing guys from that heterogeneous developmental section. He's a bulky, likable guy who almost always wears a camouflage ball cap and a crooked smile. In the first few weeks of the semester, I had been very aware that Jesse and his buddy were holding back, reserving judgment, and I'd made a deliberate effort to win them over by asking them questions, talking after class, and encouraging them in their writing. In fact, Jesse and his buddy seemed representative of a certain kind of student that I'd repeatedly seen in my classrooms in that they appeared to be from a more rural background, and they avoided engaging with the material. Rather than participating in classroom discussions and debates, they chose to focus solely on doing what needed to be done to pass the course. In one isolated incident early in the semester, Jesse had spoken up, offering his opinion that the term "redneck" wasn't offensive if applied to a woman, but he believed it to be derogatory if applied to a man. When I asked him what a non-offensive, equivalent term might be, he settled on describing himself as "country" or a "country boy."

When we spoke in the hallway towards the end of that semester, I praised him for his improvement as a writer, and he responded by saying, "Y'know Rob, at first I thought you might

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<sup>8</sup> Instead of serving as a theoretical catalyst for all sorts of research, the concept of anti-intellectualism has largely served as a political buzzword – the requisite counterpunch if you're running for office and the other candidate calls you an "elitist."



be queer, but you turned out to be an alright guy.” Taken aback by his use of the term “queer,” I asked him what he meant by that word, and he stumbled a bit, backpedalling and indicating that he didn’t have a “problem with gay guys.” He’d just been confused since I was an English teacher who wrote poetry. It seemed to me that his remark was more telling of his preconceptions about English teachers than it was of his actual time in the classroom with me.

I pursued the issue in conversations with other long-term locals. They agreed with Jesse in that they generally thought of male English teachers as being somewhat effeminate. The same stereotype seemed, by extension, to hold for all sorts of writers. I saw that, for native Ozarkians, an interest in the life of the mind was considered unmanly. Thinking through my desire to connect with and engage these tight-lipped “country” students led me to begin reading about the culture of the rural South and, in particular, the concept of anti-intellectualism since it has traditionally been linked with the perception that academic knowledge or book-learning (as contrasted to manual labor or a more utilitarian model of education) tends to feminize male students. Carlos Dews and Carolyn Law’s “Anti-intellectualism, Homophobia, and the Working-Class Gay/Lesbian Academic” explores this same connection between homophobia and anti-intellectualism and discusses the difficulty of “coming out” in working-class homes.

### **Methodology:**

If I begin by saying that the project I have undertaken was an ethnographic case study, readers should not be deceived into believing that naming the method creates a certain degree of epistemological validity or invokes a specific methodological precedent. In other words, I would like to begin by acknowledging that there haven’t been a great number of successful ethnographic studies in composition and that those which have achieved some degree of success

(measured by their acceptance in the field at large) take a variety of different shapes. It is a methodology in constant flux, evolving rapidly over the last two decades. Composition theorists working on categorizing and defining methodologies have acknowledged this ongoing evolution. Stephen North calls the community of working ethnographers in composition “better defined at its borders, by its *contrasts* with other methodological communities than by reference to any internal coherence” (273-274). Similarly, Kenneth Kantor, Dan Kirby, and Judith Goetz have argued that it is important for researchers to “choose methods appropriate to the purposes of their studies, rather than arbitrarily restricting themselves to methods that seem to be required by a particular paradigm” (295). Tellingly, Ralph Cintron has shown with his summary of the “civil war among anthropologists” that these matters are just as unsettled in other fields (Wearing 371). In fact, the difficulties of defining an ethnographic approach in composition or any other field are representative of an ongoing struggle in the humanities and social sciences between emergent postmodern discourses and more traditional, positivist epistemologies.

The fact that there are very few settled standards for the proper handling of ethnographic research in our field (or any other) does not absolve me, however, from defending or explaining my methods. In fact, it requires me to explain my approach in greater detail and to establish the assumptions on which these details rest. If, as we have learned from Thomas Kuhn and a host of others, all knowledge is rhetorically constructed and situated within the constraints of a given knowledge community, then I should begin this section by attempting to convince readers of the validity of my project. Or, as Wendy Bishop puts it, “All research methods and research reports are rhetorical, that is, all use the reliable triad of classical persuasion: *logos*, the appeal to reason, *pathos*, the appeal to emotion, and *ethos*, the appeal of personality or character” (I-Witnessing 149). I acknowledge, then, that it is my responsibility to convince readers that this study has

generated useful and reliable knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Just as in legal cases, this “reliability” must be at least partially determined by precedent, so I begin the process of defending my methods by outlining three trends in ethnographic research about writing: a broader understanding of context, a move towards narrative-driven “thick” description, and an understanding that the researcher’s role is necessarily interactive.

Many of the early ethnographic projects in composition understood the context of their study in very limited terms so that the writing classroom itself became an important object of study. For example, Florio and Clark’s “The Function of Writing in an Elementary Classroom,” published in 1981, is frequently cited as an early and influential research design. Interestingly, the researchers specify in the abstract that “[l]ittle is known about the role played by writing in the lives of children *either inside or outside* school” [emphasis added] (115). Their study, however, is limited to classroom interactions between teachers and students. At the time, this narrow focus was not unusual. In fact, Kantor, Kirby, and Goetz, writing at about the same time, suggest that ethnographic research is focused on phenomena occurring “within school, classroom, and even non-school settings” (300). That offhand phrase, “even non-school settings,” implies how strongly the study of classroom writing was prioritized.

Some of this was because of widespread interest in process-based research and instruction at the time. One of the great hopes of process-based research was that its phenomenological bent would enable composition to become more “scientific,” and thereby lend the field additional credibility. It is worth noting that the beginnings of the process movement are usually traced back to Janet Emig’s *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, which

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<sup>9</sup> As Bishop also notes, “in author-saturated texts, those that acknowledge their constructedness [...] there is a better chance for engaging a reader” (152). It is with this principle in mind, that I have adopted a more personal, present tone throughout this piece.

included a case study. Drawing on that influential study, many researchers combined a holistic understanding of the writing event with positivist methodologies. Frequently, lip service was paid to the “naturalistic” or “descriptive” approach before the focus of the study turned to data-collection techniques that emphasized quantifiability and replicability.

Since those early efforts, which tended to focus exclusively or primarily on the classroom, the body of research has steadily shifted towards a more inclusive understanding of context. Katherine Kelleher Sohn’s *Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia: Literary Practices Since College* is a perfect example of this since it analyzes the ways in which Sohn’s female subjects are “isolated economically, societally, geographically, and culturally yet [...] manage to surmount obstacles to become self-fulfilled” (7). Sohn’s example is especially useful to this study because of her emphasis on rural students and rural culture and because of her involved discussion of dialectical prejudice.

Ralph Cintron’s *Angels’ Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday* is another example of an ethnographic work in composition that considers a wider cultural context although it is much more infused by the anthropological tradition in ethnography than Sohn’s work. Both, however, display a preoccupation with methodology – they are as much books about how to conduct an ethnographic study as they are pure ethnographies.

Just as there is a marked progression in composition’s ethnographic research from the limited context of the classroom towards a much broader conception of a subject’s writing context, there is a corresponding movement towards increased use of narrative as a means of presenting the research. Early ethnographies tended to present their findings in a terse, academic style suggestive of writing in the hard sciences. This worked well with the quantitative data-collection techniques that were often being employed. Contemporary composition

ethnographies, however, tend to emphasize a mixture of writing styles, moving fluidly between presentations of data, theoretical arguments, and narrative depictions of the case study subjects. Wendy Bishop, describing this mixture, contrasts “cool” scientific writing with “‘warm’ style – vivid subjective narratives that are, inevitably, meditative and interpretive” (I-Witnessing 150). Though Bishop’s “warm writing” is suggestive, the usual term is “thick description.” Borrowed from anthropologist Clifford Geertz’ “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” it describes the ability of the writer, typically through narrative means, to make the behavior of others meaningful and comprehensible through contextualization.

This movement towards incorporating narrative moments in the text of an ethnography can be partly explained by the increasing acceptance of postmodern philosophies, which have undermined and discredited the idea of scientific objectivity. If objectivity is no longer a goal, then it makes perfect sense to adopt a writing style that acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher/narrator. Nancy Welch’s “And Now That I Know Them: Composing Mutuality in a Service Learning Course” is a prime example of the trend towards mixing academic and narrative styles. Infused by feminist theory, her essay alternates between detailed stories about students and lucid discussions of postmodern philosophy. The result is a rich exploration of how students and teens at a community center collaborated to explore and create their own written identities.<sup>10</sup>

These two trends represent the desire of composition researchers to move away from an exclusively scientific epistemology. The third trend, that of increasing researcher/subject interaction, is yet another facet of the same movement. For the purposes of this project, a

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<sup>10</sup> Welch’s project is also an example of the way that writing teachers are assigning ethnographic projects – asking students to employ the same epistemological strategies and work through the same rhetorical problems as their instructors. Ian Barnard’s “Anti-Ethnography?” traces this change and discusses some inherent problems.

conception of the researcher that presupposes some significant interaction is necessary, since I cannot reasonably expect to maintain a policy of non-interference, what Janice Lauer and William Asher call the “minimum of overt intervention” (390). After all, I work with these students daily, and we live in the same small town. A hands-on, participant-observer model is required. The key tenet of this model is that the researcher has to balance two positions – he/she is both an insider and an outsider to the community being studied. In order to begin to understand a community, one must enter it as fully as possible. Still, when writing, the researcher must maintain an interpretive vantage point. Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary* blurs the line between memoir and ethnography, and in doing so it provides us with an excellent example of this necessary but always tenuous duality. Rose’s preface tells readers that the book is “a hopeful book about those who fail” (xi). He is writing about the educationally disadvantaged and underprepared, and he manages the participant-observer’s balancing act chronologically – that is, he writes first in memoir form about his own educational difficulties before moving into a discussion of students with whom he has worked. As a former member of their community, he is able to enter into the struggles of his students.

If Mike Rose can speak with some personal authority about the plight of the educationally underprepared since he once was underprepared, I can do something similar for almost opposite reasons. After a childhood spent mostly overseas with frequent moves, I have elected to live in the Ozarks and raise my children here because I am drawn to rural life and rural people. I have deliberately chosen this place and these people. Rather than being (like Rose) a former member of a community, I am a current member of the community who hopes to become more deeply rooted in this place, and this project is a reflection of that hope. Wendell Berry,

public intellectual *and* advocate for ruralism, has written that the existence of any community is predicated on the residents' understanding and knowledge of each other:

A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.

(47)

It is my sincere desire to know these students – my neighbors – more fully, to respect their differences, to learn from them, and to teach them what I have learned about the joy and beauty of intellectual pursuits. At the same time, I'm very aware that I'm a guest here, a foreigner. In this way, I am also balancing dual roles.

It is true that ethnographic research in composition has steadily moved towards a more radical approach that places less emphasis on the hallmarks (replicability, isolation of variables, and researcher objectivity) of the scientific approach, but it would be a mistake to assume that I've adopted this approach simply because it's trendy. The simple fact is that I've adopted this approach because it's the only avenue I can see which offers the possibility of answering questions which have plagued me since I began teaching in the Ozarks. An ethnographic approach is necessary in this case for two related reasons. First, any attempt to understand the representative writing problems of another culture necessitates a "holistic" approach since "culture" is such a nebulous concept. To understand these students, I need to explore their political and religious beliefs, their family histories, and their individual ideas about writing. In short, I need to understand their unique situatedness in this place and time.

The second reason I chose an ethnographic approach is that it seemed impossible to me to create a project that could answer these questions while eliminating enough variables to support any kind of positivist methodology. The fact that the Subject of the study is in one sense a culture (as it is continuously revealed in the subjects I have selected) means that the project is necessarily far-reaching and intricate, tracing interwoven influences and ideas.

Other scholars have adopted similar approaches when dealing with the unique place of writing in other cultures. Earlier, I mentioned Sohn's study of Appalachian women, and there are other projects which tell the stories of other communities. For example, Beverly Moss' *A Community Text Arises* documents the ways in which speakers and congregations interact to compose sermons in African-American churches. Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* contrasts two geographically proximate communities (one white, one African American) and the ways in which the children of each community use and acquire language. Heath's work has special relevance to this project since the white community, "Roadville," serves as an interesting example of rural, southern culture.

### **Selection of Subjects:**

The eight subjects I selected were chosen based upon a number of demographic data sourced from their initial applications to the college. A list of eighty-six students taking developmental English courses at the Branson location was pared down by each criterion until eleven students remained. Of these eleven, eight agreed to participate in the study. I mention this fact before discussing the criteria in more detail because it seems significant – each of the students in this sample chose to participate in the study with no incentive provided. Since the study represents an academic endeavor, voluntary participation on the part of the students might



indicate that the students were not as representative of the anti-intellectual mindset as I had hoped. Further complicating the matter, my experiences with self-identified “country” students indicated that there were typically non-communicative and resisted (at least initially) attempts to solicit opinions or interest. In theory, anti-intellectual students would be less likely to participate voluntarily, and students who did agree to participate would be less likely to hold anti-intellectual views. I could see no way around this problem, however, since their participation had to be voluntary. Clearly, mandating participation (if we were to ignore the inherent ethical difficulty) would skew the results just as thoroughly, albeit in the opposite direction.

The criteria I chose to screen potential students were reflective of both my understanding of anti-intellectualism and the limits of the available data. All eight of the students I selected were chosen because they were males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, they were fully eligible for federal financial aid, they were first-generation college students, and they had graduated from rural high schools.<sup>11</sup> Some of these criteria are relatively easy to defend. For example, it seemed reasonable to me to assume that if anti-intellectualism is typically associated with a desire to preserve masculinity, it would be more prevalent in men. I chose to limit the age of the participants because several sociological studies had indicated a negative correlation between age and anti-intellectual sentiment. (See Laverghetta, Stewart, and Weinstein; Also, Laverghetta and Nash) These same studies also indicated a negative correlation between parental educational attainment and anti-intellectualism. As you would expect, the children of less-educated parents are more distrustful of higher education.

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<sup>11</sup> In two cases I made an exception to the rural high school criterion. In both of these cases, the student had not graduated from high school, but had received a GED. Both students’ home addresses, however, indicated that they lived in a remote, rural area.

The decision to limit the sample to students from rural backgrounds is a bit trickier to defend. Both Hofstadter and Jacoby's historical studies indicate that anti-intellectualism is more prevalent in the southern portion of the US for a variety of historical and economic reasons. Tracing the historical disparity between educational attainment in the North and the South, Jacoby argues that it has "persisted until after the Second World War – and the gap has not been fully closed even today" (52). Of course, I want to be careful here not to mindlessly conflate "the South" with rural life, but it would be disingenuous to maintain that there is not a widely recognized link between the two that dates back to the South's agrarian roots.

It also seems to me that Branson's unique socioeconomic structures play an important role here. Since the city of Branson is much wealthier than the surrounding rural areas, it has the best primary and secondary schools in the area. Also, real estate inside the city limits is much more expensive than in outlying areas, so a student who lives in the city is likely to be wealthier and better educated than a student who graduated from one of the outlying schools like Reeds Spring or Forsyth. Those same rising property values have caused most of the families who originally owned land within the city limits to sell, moving out a few miles and making room for retirees, condos, and vacation homes. Because of these economic realities, selecting students from rural areas (even if they are only a few miles from the city itself) increases the chance that they will be deeply rooted in rural, Southern culture.

My decision to include only those students who were fully eligible for federal financial aid was an attempt to limit the sample to students from a background of family poverty using the only data that was available. All of the students in the study had an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) report of zero, the lowest possible score, which indicates the greatest degree of financial need.

### **Data-Collection:**

In order to create the triangulation that is necessary for ethnographic research, I have applied five data-collection mechanisms. First, I created a pair of questionnaires (appendix A) for the students to fill out, one to be completed at the beginning of the year-long study and one near the end. The questions in these questionnaires have been written to solicit information about the cultural components of anti-intellectualism: religion, politics, education, and pragmatism. Additionally, some questions are written more generally, asking about each student's attitudes and feelings towards writing and reading. Each of the questions is designed to be open-ended so that students should provide fuller, more detailed responses. The questions are also written as neutrally as possible to avoid suggesting answers that support my preconceptions.

After the collection of the first questionnaire, I conducted a series of hour-long interviews. In all, I conducted three interviews during the year – one in the spring semester of 2011, one in the fall semester of 2011, and one again in the final, spring semester of 2012. A script (appendix B) containing a series of questions was written for each of the interviews, but these scripts should be understood as conversation starters rather than prescriptions to which I adhered. If the conversation led in a promising or interesting direction, I followed it. All of these interviews were digitally recorded and catalogued.<sup>12</sup>

Thirdly, I asked the students to give me copies of all the writing they felt comfortable sharing. Specifically, I expected them to give me copies of all of the academic work they completed and any creative writing that they did. One subject gave me two chapters of a novel

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<sup>12</sup> Appendix C includes the full transcript of my first formal interview with “Jacob,” the student who is the focus of the third chapter. I have included this transcript in the hope that it will be doubly beneficial. It should serve as an illustration of the wide-ranging and personal nature of these interviews. Additionally, it may help to “flesh out” or supplement readers’ perceptions of Jacob during their reading of that third chapter.

that he is planning on developing. Others indicated that they do as little writing as possible. I analyzed these writing samples by looking specifically for reference to the four traits of anti-intellectualism that Hofstadter delineates.

Fourthly, I taught two sections of the college's introductory composition course that focused on anti-intellectualism. In each section, students completed a sequence of assignments culminating in an argumentative research paper that addressed some aspect of anti-intellectualism. With their permission, I collected all of the essays that these students wrote for me. Foregrounding my research topic in this way allowed me to directly solicit advice and insight from native Ozarkians.

Finally, I interacted with these students in countless more informal ways. We got coffee together, chatted in my office between classes, and shared meals. These informal interactions were documented, when possible, through extensive field notes. As a model for these notes, I adopted the informal personal tone advocated by Bishop in *Ethnographic Writing Research: Writing It Down, Writing It Up, and Reading It* (76-79).

### **Chapter Outlines:**

In this first chapter, I have provided some context for the project – cultural, historical, economic, and institutional. Additionally, I have described some of the problems that initially led me to undertake this study and outlined my research methods. In the second chapter, I present the findings of this study, foregrounding aspects of rural culture that cause students to struggle with the demands of academic discourse. Chapters three and four will further illustrate these findings since each chapter traces a single student's progress through the composition sequence. In the fifth chapter of the study, I make pedagogical suggestions – both philosophical and

curricular – that address the needs of students from rural cultures. Finally, the sixth chapter concludes the project by exploring the ethical dimensions of the process of acculturation and calling for further research.

## Chapter Two – Findings

### Overview:

In describing the literacy culture of the students with whom I've worked, I am undertaking an unusually broad project, but I have done so the belief that any attempt to separate students' writing from their reading or thinking is doomed. Scores of scholars have noted that these elements of literacy are necessarily interrelated, and any attempt – in terms of research or pedagogy – to address them as discrete skills is short-sighted and often counter-productive. After all, successful use of language, according to James Gee, requires that “at any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes” (526). Since communicational interchanges are rife with possibilities for error and overwhelmingly multi-faceted “what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but *saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*” (526). Gee refers to these combinations as “Discourses.”<sup>13</sup>

The Discourse of a people-group then constitutes the writing and reading practices of the group, but should also be extended to include social conventions and philosophical and epistemological tenets that are common to the group. These are the defining elements of a Discourse, but it is also important to see that there is a very real sense in which discourse

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<sup>13</sup> He also introduces the terms “primary discourse” and “secondary discourse” to refer, respectively, to students' discourse communities of origin and any discourse community which they might enter later in life (527). Following Gee, I will use the term “primary discourse” throughout the rest of this project to refer to the distinctively rural literacy conventions in which students were raised. Similarly, I use “secondary discourse” to refer to the academic discourse community into which they are being acculturated.

conventions define the group itself. That is, social groups can productively be understood as collections of people who think, read, write, and believe in similar ways.

Patricia Bizzell argues that this is especially true of academic discourse since academia is a community that lacks many other elements that might otherwise serve to unite a group – geographic proximity, social class, racial or ethnic similarity, etc.:

The academic community is a community united almost entirely by its language, I think; the academic community is not coterminous with any social class, though it is more closely allied to some than to others. Like any other language community, the academic community uses a preferred dialect (so-called ‘Standard English’) in a convention-bound discourse (academic discourse) that creates and organizes the knowledge that constitutes the community’s world view. (“Basic Writers” 167-168)

This broader definition of “discourse” is significant for several reasons, not least of which is that it establishes the fact that membership in a discourse community involves more than just adhering to the demands of a certain style of writing.

In fact, membership in a given discourse community may allow students to create thoughts that would not have been possible in the constraints of a different discourse community. Conversely, membership in a certain discourse community may preclude thinking certain sorts of thoughts. This is what Bizzell is suggesting when she argues that “many genres, like the many dialects of English, are equally capable of generating complex thoughts, [but] they are not capable of generating the *same* complex thoughts” (“Basic Writers” 166). It follows, then, that any educational endeavor – especially one concerned with reading and writing – should be understood as a process of acculturation. Our goal is not simply to teach the students a certain

skillset or the “correct” way to structure an argument. Instead, we must acknowledge that we hope to fundamentally alter how students think.

This acknowledgement creates a spate of serious ethical complications. If our goal is acculturation – the term “conversion” also seems to fit – then education can be seen as an act of violence or cultural imperialism. If nothing more, it certainly represents a kind of “bait and switch” tactic since students typically don’t come to college with the hope that we will remake their belief systems. This is especially true of many of the rural students pursuing technical degrees that I’ve worked with during this project. If students enroll in a welding program, for example, because they have been convinced by a recruiter or television ad that welding represents a path to stable, salaried employment, they have certainly not “signed on” to be remade in the intellectual image of their composition instructor – or, at least, the discourse community to which the instructor belongs. I will explore these ethical implications much more fully in the fifth chapter since that chapter focuses on pedagogical strategies, and it is important to address *why* we acculturate students to academic discourse before moving to *how*. For now, it is enough to acknowledge that the composition classroom – even more than other classrooms since it marks most students’ introduction to academic discourse – represents a veiled but very real clash of cultures.

In order to draw any observations about a discourse community, you must be in some ways estranged from that community. This is because “when we have really mastered anything (e.g., a Discourse), we have little or no conscious awareness of it” (Gee 532). There is an advantage, then, to the participant-observer role for the ethnographer since it presupposes that the researcher must be familiar with the culture being observed but also maladapted to that culture in some degree. Put simply, you cannot draw useful observations about the discourse



practices of a culture unless you are somehow *in* that culture but not *of* that culture. This is another way of saying that ethnographic research requires both cultural immersion and a critical vantage point.

Drawing observations about the primary discourses of these students is a necessary precursor to the formulation of pedagogical strategies since our efforts to “reach” students will be successful to the degree that we understand them. Or, put in rhetorical terms, we will be more successful in convincing our audience when we can anticipate their misunderstandings and objections. The importance of this understanding is suggested by Bizzell’s call for “a study of basic writers [...] a series of interviews to tell us how they mediate between their home cultures and the academic culture as they move on through their college educations” (172-173). In one sense, this study can be seen as an answer to that call.

### **Data Collection**

As I have suggested earlier, the historical context provided by Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* has served as an impetus and a suggestive framework for this study. Although I haven’t made any effort to replicate his findings in this piece, their influence is felt in that my reading influenced the questions I asked. Perhaps most significantly, I used Hofstadter’s text (supplemented by other sources that build on his findings) as a research focus for two sections of composition, providing students in those classes with terminology and a conceptual framework for understanding their own culture.

Students in those courses completed a six-essay sequence. Three of those assignments asked them to focus specifically on anti-intellectualism in their own cultural heritage.<sup>14</sup> Of the forty-seven students in those two sections, only one asked to be excluded from the study. The other forty-six were not selected in any way – they’re simply the forty-six students who signed up for my courses – so they should be a fairly representative group of Ozarkians. As is typical at our education center, the course I taught in the evening included a greater proportion of non-traditional students.

As I was teaching these courses, I began also to implement the case study protocol described in chapter one. All eight of the students who initially agreed to complete the study participated in at least some limited way, completing a few interviews or questionnaires. (I should note that none of the eight case study students was ever enrolled in one of my courses. I didn’t attempt to keep them from enrolling in my courses, so I don’t know whether they chose to avoid me or whether this is simply an accident of scheduling.) I was only able to get a complete set of data from three of the eight students, however. Some of this difficulty was because only two of the eight were still enrolled in classes by the end of the study. During the interviews, I found that students were generally genial and open to personal questions. Despite how pleasant they were, they failed to return questionnaires and regularly skipped interview appointments. As I walked the hallways of the Branson center, it became common for me to encounter a case study subject who had skipped a recent appointment. In these cases, the students were always apologetic and promised to reschedule.

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<sup>14</sup> The handouts for these six assignments are found in appendix D. Additionally, a fuller discussion of the pedagogical purposes of these assignments is found in the second half of chapter five.

It was also difficult to get students to share copies of the written work they were doing in other classes. Again, they expressed their willingness to provide me with those copies, and then they simply failed – time and time again – to bring me the essays. In several instances, I asked students if I had their permission to get a copy of their written work from the instructor to whom they had submitted it. Each time, the student agreed readily. In this way, I was able to obtain copies of some already graded student work.

As I studied my subjects' writings, spent time interviewing them, and pored over their questionnaires, I began to identify three hallmarks of their primary discourse that affected their ability to successfully participate in the academic community. I will argue that two of these hallmarks – a literal-minded reading style and an epistemological system that accepts some authorities unquestioningly – are directly related to the prevalence of evangelical fundamentalism in the area. Specifically, I argue that students approach academic reading using the strategies of fundamentalist scriptural interpretation. Similarly, they struggle to craft arguments when the credibility or rhetorical efficacy of a trusted authority (for example, the Bible) is undermined. The third hallmark I've identified is what I'm calling "academic pragmatism" – students' desire to move through college as easily as possible in the hopes of securing better or higher-paying employment. (This pragmatism is to be contrasted with an intellectual mindset that seeks personal growth and a wider worldview.) The remainder of this chapter will discuss these characteristics of rural discourse more fully while providing some examples of the ways that they are revealed in students' writing and classroom behavior.

## A Note on Masculinity

I had expected issues of gender and masculinity to figure prominently in my study. After all, those issues were foregrounded in the theory I had read. Robert J. Connors “Teaching and Learning as a Man” suggests that a male teacher is uniquely positioned to mentor male students who often feel a need for “initiation” into manhood (147). Similarly, Lad Tobin’s “Car Wrecks, Baseball Caps, and Man-to-Man Defense: The Personal Narratives of Adolescent Males” discusses the emotional difficulty an instructor may face when dealing with the personal writing of male students who seem to embody certain negative stereotypes of masculinity. Thomas Newkirk’s *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture* focuses more on the ways that the institutional culture of grade schools tends to disadvantage boys. In all of these sources (and many others) an argument is made that “questions of masculinity and the teaching issues that surround it [are] omnipresent but hardly mentioned” (Connors 139). I identify with the work of these scholars, and I believe that their arguments might have special merit given a rural context. In fact, the conversation with Jesse in which he had questioned my masculinity served as one impetus for this project.

In interview after interview, however, students expressed their belief that gender didn’t play a role in their writing and reading. It is probable, of course, that students are simply not aware of the many ways in which gender affects their literacy practices. Within the constraints of this study, however, I was not able to develop any useful data regarding gender roles in anti-intellectualism. (A further study might illuminate this problem by working with two groups of subjects, one male and one female.)

## Evangelical Fundamentalism

Since I will be arguing that local students' reading and thinking strategies have been deeply influenced by the religious culture of the area, I should begin by more fully establishing that context. This section will do so in two ways. I'll begin with a few stories from my own experiences in Branson before moving into a historical overview of fundamentalism that suggests its unique influence in this region.

When I took my current position as Director of OTC's Branson Center, I began immediately to try to engage the community. Since the Center's current location in the back of an outlet mall makes us nearly invisible, I began attending community events, promoting our services to potential students and community leaders. As I've mentioned, Branson's culture is very much that of a small town despite the huge number of tourists who visit every year, so I found it difficult to know where to begin. It felt to me as if everyone I met had gone to kindergarten with everyone else I met, and newcomers were not to be trusted. After months of "pressing flesh" and meeting people, I was finally invited to join the Education Catalyst Group,<sup>15</sup> a gathering of community education advocates. Attending my first meeting, I shook hands with everyone, smiled, and found a seat at the conference room table. As the meeting was called to order, the Chair turned to me and asked, "Rob, since you're new, would you mind opening us in prayer?" The request startled me since my invitation to the group hadn't mentioned any religious affiliation or purpose. (I was reminded of childhood meals with my father, who made a

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<sup>15</sup> These Catalyst Groups are an attempt by community leaders to pool their resources and promote the development of the Tri-Lakes area. Their model seeks to create a self-sustaining organization that can address community needs through activism and influence. Currently, there are Catalyst Groups for Education, Healthcare, the Environment, and Employment. Additionally, two steering groups have been formed. One works to preserve the cultural heritage of the Ozarks; the other exists to help the subgroups coordinate their efforts. The groups are faith-based, but are often not presented as such – largely because it goes without saying in Branson.

point of asking guests to join the family in prayer. The intent may have been to make those guests feel welcome, but even as a small child I felt that it was unmannerly to put them on the spot.) Somehow, I managed to stumble through an innocuous and doctrinally neutral invocation. I've had that experience many times since then. In Branson, it is not unusual for any number of civic organizations or community committee meetings to begin with prayer – even if the stated goals of the organization are purely secular. The people of the Missouri Ozarks are so overwhelmingly evangelical (of one variety or another) that they often assume everyone else is as well. Most of the remainder of this section will explore the implications of those deeply-held religious sentiments for students at the College. First, however, some discussion of the history of Branson should help to explain how protestant evangelicalism came to be such a significant cultural influence.

As Aaron Ketchell has shown in his insightful historical study of Branson's tourism industry, *Holy Hills of the Ozarks: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri*, the Tri-lakes region's economic reliance on tourism is inextricably interwoven with the deep evangelical religious sentiment that has been part of the Ozarks' cultural identity since before Harold Bell Wright's best-selling novel, *The Shepherd of the Hills*, first drew national attention to the region in the early 1900's. Connecting that sentiment to the region's resistance to change, Ketchell notes that "Branson's history is indeed sated with examples of antimodernism informed by religious stances, and the larger region has often been put forth as one of America's chief resisters of modernization" (xvii). He argues that Wright's fans were drawn to a vision of non-denominational Christianity that, tellingly, values the religious experiences and insights of regular Christians over that of theologians. For Ketchell, this religious populism is clearly connected to a similar "populist aversion to social privilege" (xvii). (It is worth noting here that

these two cultural forces Ketchell connects, evangelicalism and populism, are both mentioned in Hofstadter's list of four key contributors to anti-intellectualism.)

Tracing the connection between religion and tourism in Branson through the decades, Ketchell notes several modern-day examples including Kanakuk Camp, an enormously successful Christian youth sports camp located on Lake Taneycomo, and the ministry of Jim Bakker, which has found a home in Branson after the evangelist's much-publicized fall from grace in the 1980s. It is clear that Branson's tourism boom of the 1980s and 90s coincided with the rise to power of the religious right, and the corresponding financial and political gains of evangelicals.<sup>16</sup> Ketchell concludes by arguing that Branson's development has taken a turn for the secular with the construction of the Branson Landing, a three hundred million dollar lakeside shopping mall development that includes a convention center and several luxury hotels. Ketchell sees this project, when combined with the proliferation of golf courses and other non-religious attractions, as an attempt by outside investors to capitalize on Branson's tourism market while broadening their appeal by focusing less on the region's religious roots.<sup>17</sup>

Although Ketchell's book has proven prescient, and it is clear to local business owners that Branson will have to adapt in order to remain competitive, the plans of local leaders and business owners don't necessarily have much impact on the mindsets of local families. In fact, it is characteristic of these families to resist any attempt towards modernization or secularization. That resistance to change is nurtured by evangelical faith in at least two ways – both of which are

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<sup>16</sup> Warren Cole Smith's *A Lover's Quarrel with the Evangelical Church* also cites Branson as a place where commerce and religion are united in a way he finds reprehensible. In fact, this discussion of Branson's economy is one example in a chapter entitled "The Christian-Industrial Complex" (95-123).

<sup>17</sup> The publication of Ketchell's book predates the completion of the Branson Landing project, but it is now possible to stand on the playing fields of Kanakuk Camp and see the luxury condominiums on the top floors of Branson Landing. These two properties, one on each side of winding Lake Taneycomo, seem representative of Branson's economic past and future.

relevant to the writing classroom. First, evangelical apologetics and theology are typically based on an outdated and philosophically unsophisticated model that shapes students' worldviews. Second, evangelical approaches to scriptural interpretation are often anti-intellectual in nature and impede teachers' efforts to help students become more highly and critically literate.

The terms "outdated" and "unsophisticated" that I apply to evangelical thinking might seem harsh or uncharitable, but I mean them literally rather than pejoratively. In fact, recent advances in philosophy have largely been ignored by American evangelicals, and Mark Noll, a historian specializing in American Christianity, suggests several reasons why. Noll's argument, expressed in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, is that Americans (particularly Protestant theologians and ministers) identified themselves intellectually with the so-called Scottish Enlightenment, which argued that "all humans possessed, by nature, a common set of capacities – both ethical and epistemological – through which they could grasp the basic realities of nature and morality" (84-85). According to Noll, this philosophy had a pragmatic appeal to American Protestants since it allowed them to argue that certain truths were self-apparent:

In the midst of an era marked by a radical willingness to question the verities of the past, the intuitive philosophy provided by the Scots offered an intellectually respectable way to establish public virtue in a society that was busily repudiating the props upon which virtue had traditionally rested – tradition itself, divine revelation, history, social hierarchy, an inherited government, and the authority of religious denominations. (87)

In the absence of these traditional epistemological supports, the nascent American mind was eager for a philosophy that was self-supporting. Noll sees evidence of this in the language employed by the nation's founding fathers: "What weight could the traditional authority of the king in Parliament carry against the 'self-evident truths,' the 'unalienable rights,' or the 'laws of



nature’ proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence?” (88). Since protestant theology, democratic political theory, and the science of the times operated under similar epistemologies, it was initially relatively easy for evangelicals to defend their faith and their social influence.

In the time after the Civil War, however, a host of new social and scientific realities challenged the assumption that Biblical and scientific truths were both self-evident and reconcilable. Noll sees this period as pivotal since the growing disparity between American culture and evangelical culture exposed weaknesses in evangelical thought and scholarship:

Habits of patient study were far less well exercised than habits of quick quotation. Proof-texting did not cause great damage so long as the culture as a whole held to general Christian values, but when those general Christian values began to weaken, the weakness in evangelical theologizing – even more, in thinking like a Christian about the world in general – became all too evident. (107)

Since the protestant tradition had historically been marked by a unique and exclusive reliance on the Bible as the only source of divine revelation (Martin Luther’s *Sola Scriptura*), the stage was set for what Noll sees as the second stage of evangelical thought: fundamentalism.

Again, it is important to note that I am using this term literally and descriptively, not disparagingly. “Fundamentalist” is a term that is often bandied about or used for political ends without any clear sense of what the term actually means. In this context, however, the term should be understood to describe a movement of American protestants which has historically sought a systematic (or totalizing) theology, which sees the Bible as literally true and inerrant, and which is characterized by what historian George Marsden<sup>18</sup> has called a “militant anti-

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<sup>18</sup> Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture* is perhaps the most comprehensive and authoritative historical study of American fundamentalism.

modernism” (4). All three of the characteristics I’ve listed have a profound impact on how students who are fundamentalists encounter the writing classroom.

### **Reading Strategies**

The second of those three characteristics, an interpretive strategy which views the Bible as both literal and inerrant, might be the easiest of the three to detect in a writing classroom. Repeated conversations with rural students in both composition and literature courses has convinced me that they struggle to determine or value metaphorical and symbolic truths. By this I mean that these students typically display an overwhelmingly literal approach to classroom texts and fail to understand that any other kind of meaning can exist. In short, one side effect of the typical fundamentalist’s scriptural interpretive strategy may be that they see all texts as having either a didactic or entertaining function. (I use the term “didactic” here to identify texts that take a kind of classic “textbook” approach, relaying reliable information in a matter-of-fact style.) A result of this approach is that these students often misinterpret satire and fail to understand the cultural importance of literature. Put simply, they misinterpret the truth-claims of some academic texts, and they fail to see that literary texts make their own sorts of truth-claims.

For example, the reader required in both of OTC’s college-level composition courses contains Paul Roberts’ classic satirical description of vapid student writing, “How to Say Nothing in 500 Words.” When I’ve assigned this piece to students, some of them fail to appreciate Roberts’ tone. Most recently, I followed up the reading assignment with a brief quiz that asked students to summarize Roberts’ argument and to make a few suggestions about the implications for their own writing. Several students’ responses made it clear that they took the piece at face value and were determined to “pad” their writing in the future so that they always

ended up with enough words or pages. When I took a few of these students aside to ask them how they had misread the piece so badly, they responded by saying that they expected a textbook to be “true.” They felt duped. I tried to lead them into a discussion of different kinds of truth, but I left the conversation feeling that they were doomed because the interpretive strategies they had brought with them to the college classroom left little room for subtlety or the infinite variety of literary expression.

Similarly, I was interested to find that two of my case study subjects were voracious readers of low-brow fantasy fiction. One of them, Bryan, even had tried his hand at producing a Tolkien-esque epic. When I asked him why he found that kind of reading and writing pleasurable but thought his coursework tedious, he responded that he enjoyed reading and writing fiction because there was no way to “get it wrong.” (Again, this is indicative of his understanding that literary texts don’t make truth-claims; therefore, there is no “right” and no “wrong.”) His course-related writing, however, had to be done correctly. In meeting with these students, I realized that they had developed two basic interpretive strategies: Fiction was valued purely for its immersive, entertainment value. Non-fiction, on the other hand, was to be read as if it were a legal brief – gleaned for bits of trivia that might show up on a test and taken at face value. This understanding helped me to see why students reading satire might feel “duped.” They have two general strategies for approaching their reading, and neither seems to fit.

Although this difficulty in seeing the importance of fiction (or other literary forms) may be attributed to a number of different cultural forces, and is certainly not unique to rural students from the Ozarks, it seems clear to me that the problem is different in kind and degree here. I believe that the primary cause for my students’ tendency to read non-fiction in this hyper-literal fashion is the influence of the fundamentalist and evangelical traditions in their lives. They tend

to apply a strategy developed for the study of scripture to their assigned reading in college. This is an apparently sensible choice on their part since they typically have no other schema or strategy for interpretation that is as fully developed as the one they have been trained in by their pastors and Sunday School teachers. Christian Smith's *The Bible Made Impossible* lists ten characteristics of this strategy, which he terms "biblicism" (4-6).<sup>19</sup> Several of these characteristics are clearly specific to the interpretation of the Bible, and these are not typically applied to students' other reading. However, three of them deeply affect the ways that many students from a fundamentalist background approach their college reading. A fuller discussion of these three will help to explain why so many students struggle to develop the varied and sophisticated interpretive strategies required of them during their college years.

Smith argues that fundamentalists believe in the "Democratic Perspicuity" of the Bible – that is, they believe that "any reasonably intelligent person can read the Bible in his or her own language and correctly understand the plain meaning of the text" (4). This concept helps to explain why students can be so frustrated with satirical or double-faced texts – given their expectation that the text will be relatively easy to interpret and the inevitable resultant misreading, it seems to them like the author's intent is to deceive or even embarrass the reader. To these students, "reading" means only the ability to "sound out" words and identify non-phonetic "sight words." As a result, I often have tense conversations with students who are humiliated because the college's placement testing protocol requires them to take the

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<sup>19</sup> The first chapter of Smith's book summarizes his central argument, which is that the fundamentalist reading strategy he describes creates a kind of cognitive dissonance and is logically untenable since it ignores what he calls "pervasive interpretive pluralism," the fact that a variety of scholars (and the denominations and theological traditions they represent) differ widely on their interpretations of many key passages. This would seem to undermine the fundamentalist belief in a single, coherent meaning for every scriptural passage, hence the "impossibility" (3-26).

developmental course, RDG 050: Introduction to College Reading. It is difficult to explain to these students that their ability to move their eyes over the page and make the appropriate sounds is not the skill being tested. Their reading teacher tells me that half of her battle is soothing their wounded egos. (The other half of her battle may be identifying and addressing some students' latent ethnocentrism since the required reading for that course includes Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, which always proves to be controversial.) Just as they are embarrassed by their need for developmental coursework in reading, they are angered when they feel that a text has tricked them or "put one over on them."

Students also struggle because they have learned to study the Bible using what Smith calls a "Commonsense Hermeneutic" – a kind of Occam's Razor interpretive strategy that holds that the Bible should be read in its "explicit, plain, most obvious, literal sense" (4).

Unfortunately, adhering to this strategy means that they are likely to cling to their first impression of a text, refusing to consider more sophisticated or complex interpretations. For example, in a recent Introduction to Literature course I taught, one middle-aged, combative woman in the course insisted that I was always "seeing things that weren't really there" or "reading too much into things." (It didn't seem like a coincidence that she spoke often of attending a local fundamentalist Church, which practices the gift of charismatic healing. She believed that an author's purpose should always be to "get the point across as easily as possible." Her outspoken resistance when I tried to lead the class in close reading exercises lasted the entire semester – I never got through to her.

I've seen students apply those two characteristics of Smith's "biblicism" to a variety of texts, but the third characteristic I will mention directly applies only to their reading of the Bible – nevertheless, it indirectly affects the way they approach every other text. Smith writes about

what he calls the “Handbook Model,” the idea that the Bible presents a “compendium of divine and therefore inerrant teachings on a full array of subjects – including science, economics, health, politics, and romance” (5).<sup>20</sup> This model is presented last in Smith’s list of ten because he argues that it is the inevitable result of belief in the previous nine. The implications of this final characteristic are widespread and should be fairly obvious. If a student grants *a priori* primacy to the Bible in every matter and assumes that the Bible presents a matter-of-fact, applicable model for all of life’s questions, then that student will struggle in every academic discipline. If the Old Testament’s description of a theocracy is taken as a handbook for the ideal government, then a student’s PLS 101: Introduction to American Government course is going to present a crisis of faith. Similarly, if the Genesis account of creation is to be understood as a literal depiction of the beginnings of life on Earth, then BIO 100: Introduction to Life Science becomes a litmus test of secularism.

In the next section, I will suggest that these students’ reliance on the Bible as their sole means of epistemological support leaves them ill-equipped to make an argument using the strategies and logical devices common in academia. Depending exclusively on an authority that has little rhetorical weight in a secular context, they are unable to defend a moral or philosophical claim. As a result, they often restrict themselves to minor arguments that can be supported in terms of efficacy. For example, a student might shy away from writing an argumentative essay about capital punishment, opting instead for a brief practical piece about the importance of weight loss. Alternatively, some students choose to “stick to their guns,” making

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<sup>20</sup> Smith’s description of the “Handbook Model” brought back a few personal memories since I was raised in Baptist Churches in which the Bible was frequently described as a “Handbook for Living.” We were taught that, read carefully, it would provide guidance for any situation.

moral arguments from scriptural support. For these students, a teacher's suggestion that the evidence must suit the audience can sound like an invitation to abandon their faith.

### **Epistemological Strategies**

Those two approaches to argument are suggestive of two stages in William Perry's model of cognitive and ethical development. Perry's model for intellectual development, established in his seminal *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*, delineates nine stages through which students are expected to progress.<sup>21</sup> A brief discussion of these stages will follow, but I should clarify that the goal of this discussion is not to propose a system by which we may categorize students. Bizzell's "William Perry and Liberal Education" does an excellent job of explaining why any such attempt to categorize students based on Perry's scheme won't work: "We should remember that Perry's scheme was based on the experiences of students who were highly successful academically and who were attending one of the most selective liberal arts colleges in the country" (451). There is no evidence to suggest that educationally underprepared rural students would experience a similar progression. Similarly, any attempt to speed students through these stages is problematic since Perry "provides no time table for progress through his scheme" so that it is impossible for instructors to know whether students are behind or ahead of the curve (451).

These difficulties are compounded by the fact that any attempt to curricularize Perry's scheme runs the danger of reducing its findings to a set of discrete stages through which we can coax students. That is, if we determined that a student was in one of the early stages, it would

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that Perry's sequential presentation of these stages has been challenged. For example, Marlene Schommer's "Effects of Beliefs About the Nature of Knowledge on Comprehension" disputes the claim that cognitive development should be understood as "unidimensional" or working in "fixed stages" (498).

seem logical to tailor our instruction to the student's needs, developing assignments that require thinking in the ways characteristic of further stages. This is problematic since it "neglect[s] the emphasis Perry himself places on the function of education as acculturation, not training; inculcation of values, not practice in techniques" (Bizzell, "William Perry" 452). Any attempt to teach to the Perry scheme, then, can undermine the scheme.

If the scheme cannot be said to accurately describe or categorize all students and if the scheme is fundamentally unteachable, what value does it have? First, I think it provides a helpful terminology for describing certain kinds of student thinking. Second, following Bizzell, I argue that Perry's scheme is useful in that it provides a "philosophical map of the changes liberal arts education seeks to induce in our students" (453). That is, it has only a limited power to describe the progression of students, but it does an excellent job of "lining out" our goals for those students. In this sense it should be seen as an important descriptor of academic discourse, of the kinds of thinking that are privileged in the academy. A long quotation from Bizzell's piece is worthwhile here since she suggests many of the implications of Perry's scheme, given this view:

Following Perry we come to realize that academic community requires students to know, for example, not only what Genesis says about the creation of the earth but also what geologists, biologists, and other scientists say about it. A community of religious fundamentalists might require only knowledge of Genesis. Furthermore, the academic community requires students to know how to evaluate competing ideas according to criteria of logical structure, adequate evidence, and so on; this academic way of thinking might not be valued, for instance, in a fundamentalist community in which tradition or



the judgment of a revered authority is sufficient to validate arguments. (William Perry 453)

I introduce Perry, then, to suggest more fully how *we* think. This way of thinking, in turn, provides a vantage point from which to consider the ways that *they* think.<sup>22</sup>

In Perry's scheme, students begin in "Dualism." They see all problems as solvable, and the answers to these problems are to be found in certain trusted authorities. Every possible answer to the problem is either absolutely right or absolutely wrong – hence the name. This dualism encompasses the first two positions of cognitive development. As students become increasingly aware that there are certain problems which don't yet have answers, they move into "Multiplicity." Typically, multiplistic students begin by understanding that some things are not yet known and move into an awareness that some things will never be known. (Like "Dualism," the term "Multiplicity" encompasses two positions.) Students' development into the final three positions, which are called "Contextual Relativism," can be emotionally unsettling since it involves completely discarding the original dualistic (right/wrong) model in favor of a version of knowledge that sees most truths as contextualized and dependent upon the knower's vantage point. Increasingly, this growing understanding places the student in the position of contextualized meaning-maker, and, for Perry, acknowledging this responsibility is the key to integrating one's cognitive and ethical growth. Although studies of these three positions are rare, (in part because subjects can be difficult to find among undergraduates) Perry suggests that

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<sup>22</sup> Bizzell's piece concludes by arguing that one important implication of the Perry scheme is that it helps us to see how "culture-bound" our classroom goals can be. Therefore, we must learn to see ourselves as "rhetors" instead of "value-neutral conveyors of truth" (454). This conclusion suggests again the ethical dimensions of our attempts to acculturate students to academic discourse.

students are fully developed when they acknowledge their ongoing responsibility to engage in meaning-making and act upon evolving, contextualized intellectual commitments.

It might be thought that students who ascribe to the “Handbook Model” for biblical interpretation can best be understood as pure Dualists – they believe that the Bible provides all the answers to life’s questions and rely on it as an absolute authority. In practice, however, I have found that they are more typically in one of the two positions of Multiplicity. That is, they believe that the Bible has answers to many of life’s questions and should be seen as a primary authority, but they also acknowledge that many issues haven’t been settled, and they typically see these issues as matters of personal choice. For example, when interviewing Josh, I asked him why he doesn’t believe in drug use. (He was planning a research paper that would support the ban on legalized marijuana.) His response initially seemed dualistic since he suggested that Biblical admonitions against alcohol could be logically extended to include all intoxicating substances. When pushed, however, he did see that his Biblical support wouldn’t have much rhetorical weight in an argument with non-believers. As a result, he suggested that they would have to “decide for themselves what to do.”

In Perry’s system, it’s clear that Josh represents a classic example of early multiplistic thinking. He believes that the Bible speaks authoritatively to many situations. In the event that a scripture can be found that seems to speak to the matter at hand, it is settled. Conversely, some situations (or some audiences, as in this case) aren’t able to be convinced with scripture. In those cases, the student finds himself uneasy since he is unable to present truth claims of any other sort.<sup>23</sup> His evangelical epistemology, which is reliant on a combination of “self-evident” truths

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Marilyn Robinson’s recent *Absence of Mind* argues that Western culture is moving more generally to an opposite position in which only scientifically determined truths bear any weight at all. Arguments based on aesthetics, morality, religion, or philosophy are

and divine revelation, is difficult to defend when those truths aren't evident to other parties and those same parties don't accept the authority of the Bible.

Many students are aware, on some level, of this difficulty. I saw evidence of this awareness in the argumentative essays submitted by one section of composition that I taught. Since this section was one of the ones that I led through an involved multi-assignment study of anti-intellectualism, I was excited to read their argumentative essays. They'd finally been given the freedom to choose their own topic – as long as it dealt in some respect with our research emphasis. Throughout the semester we'd discussed the importance of Anti-Intellectualism in politics, education, media, and technology, so I was interested to see what direction their essays would take. Surprisingly, many students chose to write about anti-intellectualism and religion, which seemed odd since we hadn't devoted much time to that discussion in class, and none of the assigned reading had dealt with that topic in any detail. One student, Micah, proclaimed that he was “an intellectual Christian,” so he knew “exactly the kind of opposition Christian intellectuals receive in church.” In one heated paragraph, Micah expressed his frustration with Church leadership that, in his opinion, suppressed thought:

I am just tired of the arrogance of some people in the church who choose to speak for my God. Who are they to tell me that my God does not approve of my intellectual pursuits? Do they envision themselves as a conduit for God? I believe that anti-intellectualism is an issue because some elders in the church stand by it, because they believe that to question what the Bible says through intellectualism or any other means is wrong. But I believe it

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increasingly deemed irrelevant or “superstitious.” Perhaps this is another example of the way that the culture of the Ozarks can be stubbornly resistant to the cultural and intellectual drift of the world at large.

is they who are wrong. God makes it clear in his Word that he wants us to pursue him on an intellectual level.

It seems clear that Micah had been stewing over some of these issues for a long time. His essay suggests that he has been engaged in the difficult process of reconciling his faith and his intellect. Or, to put it in the terms of the Perry model, he was fully engaged in the process of development – both cognitively and ethically.

Other students, who may lack Micah's passion or self-assuredness, often choose to "play down" their faith, finding ways to give their instructors written assignments that are generally innocuous and secular-sounding. This approach is typified by Colt, who was enrolled in an Introduction to Psychology course despite the fact that he didn't believe in the efficacy of the field. In a casual conversation after my class, he told me that "a bunch of the stuff that [psychologists] think is a disease is really a demon. Instead of giving [patients] medicine, we need to pray for them." When I asked him how he was doing in his Psychology class, he said he expected to receive a "B" since "the book is pretty easy to read, and you just have to memorize the terms." Although I was taken aback by Colt's ability to distance himself intellectually from the material he was memorizing, it didn't seem to strike him as odd. As I'll discuss in the next section, this attitude, which might be characterized as "do-what-you-have-to-do-to-pass-the-class," is a characteristic of many anti-intellectual students.

### **Academic Pragmatism**

To suggest that anti-intellectual students are academically pragmatic is a bit of a tautology since those students who don't acknowledge or recognize the inherent value of learning are only likely to pursue learning as a means to professional or personal goals. A fuller

discussion of the phenomenon, however, will serve to illustrate the many ways in which this mindset determines how students will approach the composition classroom. Similarly, it may also suggest an explanation for many students' inability to engage fully with the dialogue and debate that should be common in those classrooms. Put simply, if students' goals are to meet the minimum requirements for the course so that they can progress towards a degree, eventually earning a piece of paper that will improve their employability, the excitement and joy of intellectual stimulation may seem like an unwarranted waste of time to them.

This pragmatism sometimes evidences itself in students' excessive interest in the minutiae of the field to the exclusion of the larger, more philosophic ideas that often seem more interesting to their instructors. For example, in my first few semesters of teaching at OTC's Branson Center, I was repeatedly surprised by many students' intent focus on my (admittedly somewhat boring) comma lecture. Like many composition instructors, I look on that hour-long discussion of comma usage as a necessary evil. My students, on the other hand, eagerly took notes and asked clever questions about improbable syntactical scenarios. When I asked them why they were so interested in commas, they suggested that they weren't exactly interested; they just recognized that this information was clearly testable material. In a course that focused on confusingly abstract rhetorical ideas, they welcomed discrete bits of information that could be memorized and later regurgitated on an exam. Other grammatical and mechanical writing tidbits are equally popular so that I often sense the relief from a class as we prepare to discuss semicolons or citation. It's as if the students let out a collective sigh, "Finally, he's going to talk about something real."

Similarly, I often will give students poor grades on their argumentative essays, suggesting that, in one way or another, their argument is fundamentally flawed. Typically, they respond by

asking what gives me the right to pass judgment on their opinions. In one instance that occurred early in my teaching career, a student wrote an argumentative essay condemning zoos. Her contention was that it was fundamentally wrong to pen up animals in little cages. To her mind this was even more unconscionable in the case of endangered animals since it was a real shame to imprison the last few members of a species. As a young teacher, I took the opportunity to point out every instance of her fallacious reasoning in a two-page final comment which read like a rebuttal. I mentioned the realistic habitats created by modern zoos and their commitment to repopulation programs. She responded by arguing that she had the right to her own opinion, and she didn't think it was my job to judge other people's opinions. I was initially baffled by this defense since I had always assumed that "judging other people's opinions" was a reasonable description of my job – at least when it came to grading essays. In retrospect I believe that her frustration came from two sources. First, like many students, she was operating under a multiplistic framework. When I challenged her to defend her beliefs in one way or another, she found herself unable to do so. In fact, she was surprised that I asked her to defend her position. Secondly, she was representative of the pragmatic mindset in that she expected a composition instructor to focus exclusively on the minutiae of the field. I believe that she would have welcomed criticism focused on the mechanical or grammatical aspects of her essay.

Perhaps the clearest example of this academic pragmatism occurred in a composition class I taught in the fall of 2011. The class met for three hours on Wednesday nights, and it included a group of three non-traditional female students who were all employed by a local Head Start preschool. Recent changes at the national level in Head Start stipulated that all teachers have at least a "Child Development Associate credential." Additionally, half of all the teachers at any given location must have earned "at least an Associate Degree" ("Head Start's"). These

three co-workers, who had worked together for over ten years, found that they needed to obtain a degree from a community college in order to keep their jobs. Since most of the courses they had been taking were Early Childhood Development classes that focused on content matter more obviously relevant to their jobs, they were initially frustrated about being required to take my course. In fact, one of the women asked me why a composition course was even required of them. It seemed to me that the frustration behind her question was rooted in her purely pragmatic understanding of education. She was frustrated that her employer was requiring her to go to school just to keep a job at which she already excelled. That frustration was compounded in my class because it was difficult for her to understand how the objectives of the course would relate to her job performance.

Despite all this, she was a genial, good-natured woman, so her frustration often took the form of gentle teasing and mock resistance. I responded to her teasing in kind, and by the end of the course we had become friends. (It helped that she was hard-working and therefore received excellent grades.) Despite this success, her response to a final exam question about how teachers can best lead a composition course clearly displays the mixed feelings she still had:

Being a little bit anti-intellectualist I was envious [of students in less demanding sections of the course] but I know I am better off that I was for doing it. This whole journey has had a different meaning for me than most students, I have resented the fact that I had to do it to begin with, that makes a big difference on how you view things. I would have welcomed this several years ago, but this has been so overwhelming to me now. I have been blessed with great instructors throughout my journey but it has been long and difficult. [...] In general I admire you for not giving in to the anti-intellectualists that's a

big problem for our country today. I can say that now since next semester should be my last. Ha.

Her wry response to my prompt is telling of the dissonance she felt since her research for the course had helped her to understand that her own attitudes towards education were shortsighted. At the same time, she couldn't shake the feeling that my course – with its emphasis on research and argumentation – wasn't directly relevant to her chosen profession. The fact that she was forced to take the class in order to retain her job heightened that tension.

It's clear that this academic pragmatism is culturally instilled and often compounded by difficult personal circumstances, but I have come to believe that the institution I work for is also inadvertently promoting these attitudes through our marketing and advertising campaigns. For example, one recent series of radio advertisements began by trying directly to connect college education with increased earning potential: "Consider this: recent studies show that you're likely to earn more money in your lifetime by having additional education, and OTC is here to help you" ("Fall 2011"). Is it any wonder that students pursue degrees for purely financial reasons, without any desire to grow intellectually? Similarly, we often suggest that the degrees and certificates we offer will be relatively quick and easy to earn. In that vein, one recent promotional video for OTC's Center for Workforce Development included a student interview in which the student praised his instructor, saying "He's a good instructor. He made it as easy as it could possibly be" ("Center for Workforce"). The same video concluded with a testimonial from another trainee, who suggested that he could "tell people I knew networking, and I knew what to do, but if I've got the certification behind me, it's going to add a lot more credibility" ("Center for Workforce"). In both instances the transformative nature of education is undermined – first,



by the implication that it should be relatively easy and, second, by the suggestion that our certificates merely serve as proof or validation of skills students may already have.<sup>24</sup>

I should be clear here in pointing out that I am not opposed to students receiving training for higher paying jobs. I do, however, think there is a disconnect between instructors and students in our composition classrooms. Typically, the instructors have high-minded, intellectual goals for their classes. Students, on the other hand, are encouraged by this wrongheaded marketing emphasis to believe that they can quickly and relatively effortlessly achieve a degree that will make them more employable. They're understandably confused by the way that we speak out of both sides of our mouth. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that our introductory composition course is required for most technical degrees as well as for those students who are planning on transferring to a university. To instructors, it can often feel as if they're being asked simultaneously to meet two different sets of objectives – they must prepare some students to write coherent and grammatically correct work orders while preparing other students for the intellectual challenges of junior- and senior-level work at a university. Or to put it in the terms I have been using, they are torn between teaching discrete marketable skills and introducing students to the intellectual demands of academic discourse.

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<sup>24</sup> The problem presented by our marketing is compounded by the fact that it frequently airs alongside that of a number of local proprietary colleges. Since these schools aren't receiving state or local community funding, they are entirely fiscally dependent on enrollment growth and the resulting increase in tuition. Therefore, their marketing campaigns tend to stress the ease of the program and potential earning increases even more overtly. To uninformed consumers, the distinction between a local, poorly-accredited proprietary school and a public community college can be confusing.

## **A Note on Poverty**

Despite the fact that the bulk of this chapter has focused on the philosophical problems that anti-intellectual students face in a composition course, I should not fail to mention the terrible personal circumstances that keep many students from engaging fully with the demands of their coursework. Having spent countless hours meeting with the subjects of my case study – often in their homes – I know that many of them are facing desperate poverty. I believe that this poverty keeps them from achieving their academic potential in at least two ways. First, it is understandably difficult for students to focus on intellectual growth when their financial circumstances are uncertain. Second, the sorts of personal and familial problems that frequently are associated with poverty sometimes make writing or other intellectual labor almost impossible.

Of course, this difficulty can take many forms. Some students are working too many hours at low-wage jobs. Others who are parents of small children find it almost impossible to secure a few quiet moments to do their homework. Two of the three preschool teachers I mentioned earlier were the only members of their immediate families who were employed. As a result, they were housing both their children and grandchildren. The challenges presented by these mundane difficulties shouldn't be underestimated, but there are also students who face much more dramatic problems. For example, Bruce, one of the non-traditional students in my evening composition course, faced a personal crisis when the motel he was living in was closed by the city's health inspector. Since he'd lived in that weekly-rental motel for six years and didn't have a car to move his belongings, this unexpected relocation represented a nearly insurmountable obstacle. Fortunately, I was able to help Bruce complete the "Emergency Withdrawal" paperwork and he was disenrolled from classes with a full refund. Eventually he

was able to move to another motel, and this one was a little closer to school, reducing the amount of time he spent walking each day.

In many similar instances, I found it necessary to drop the role of teacher or researcher and to simply engage with students as a friend. I recommended the college's free counseling services to many of these students. Few took me up on that offer.

## **Conclusion**

I've lived in Branson for almost a decade now, and I find a curious dichotomy in the way that I feel about my adopted hometown. I wouldn't choose to live anywhere else – it feels very much as if I'm in the right spot. I love our strange mix of bustle during the tourism season when cars are stacked bumper-to-bumper down highway 76, and I love the pervasive sense of lassitude that settles over the town during the long, cold off-season when everyone must pinch pennies. Despite that affection, at times I still feel very much the outsider. In my wife's hometown of Mountain View, Arkansas, they have a saying that seems to sum it up nicely. They say that anyone who has migrated into their little community is from "off." It's as if the world is divided into Mountain View and everywhere else.

Meeting privately with students to conduct the research for this project has left me convinced that in some senses I'll always be from off. As they've welcomed me into their lives and homes, I've found myself inadvertently adopting a certain small-town gentility. I'm likely to speak a little more slowly and to respond to my elders with "Yes, ma'am" or "Yes, sir." Despite the pervasive sense of hospitality that marked my intrusion into these students' lives, I was always aware that I came from a different place and that I needed to abide by their customs while I was their guest.

It seems to me that many of the students I meet with on a daily basis experience similar mixed feelings. They aren't hostile towards the college. In fact, they may have a great affection for certain faculty or staff members. (Lately, I've been seeing more and more people wearing OTC T-shirts and sweatshirts around town. It's a promising sign that we are beginning to be accepted by the community.) Despite that affection, they still identify strongly with their hometowns and the values and attitudes with which they were raised. In classrooms or in meetings with faculty, they feel like guests. Therefore, many of them have learned to adopt the necessary customs and mannerisms. They "play the game" while maintaining a sense of identity – a way of thinking – that is at odds with the instruction they're receiving in our classrooms.

This ability to "play the game" is one means of coping with the inevitable intellectual tension students face in this process of acculturation. The next two chapters will illustrate a number of other strategies as they each trace this process of acculturation in the life of a single student. In this way, the next two chapters should serve to "flesh out" the framework provided by this chapter. Although each of the students on which I'm focusing has faced tremendous personal challenges, I have not chosen them because they seemed most sympathetic. Instead, they were selected because I had a complete data set for each, and their experiences seemed most representative.

### Chapter Three – Jacob’s Case Study

#### Overview:

I felt it was important to devote this entire chapter to a discussion of Jacob’s life and academic career because every hallmark of rural discourse that I listed in the previous chapter is present in his life. His experience exemplifies the challenges many rural students face. Despite the fact that he has become almost emblematic in my thinking about anti-intellectualism, I’ve found it difficult to write about Jacob. This difficulty is for two related reasons. First, Jacob has had an incredibly traumatic childhood marked by abandonment and every type of abuse – physical, emotional, and sexual. Second, I find myself so personally drawn to Jacob – you just can’t help rooting for the guy – that I worry about maintaining an appropriate level of objectivity. Put simply, I want to use Jacob’s experiences as examples without depersonalizing him. In that sense, he is both the *object* and *subject* of this chapter. With these twin goals in mind, I’ve adopted a multi-voiced style, alternating between narrative and expository writing.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I was able to obtain a complete set of data for Jacob. In fact, he was a model subject, volunteering ideas that he thought might be helpful and returning questionnaires speedily. When referencing this data set, I will refer to the two questionnaires as the “first” and “last.” Similarly, the three formal interviews I conducted with Jacob will be referred to as the “first,” “midway,” and “final” interviews. Additionally, I conducted a fourth recorded interview with Jacob, which I refer to as our “follow-up” interview. Finally, Jacob and I spoke often throughout the year of this study. He made a point of dropping by my office and chatting in the hallways. Throughout this chapter, I’ve referred to these unrecorded interactions as “casual conversations.”

Although the structure of this chapter is modeled on the framework I established in chapter two, I have not chosen to subdivide Jacob's reading and epistemological strategies since they're necessarily interrelated. After a discussion of Jacob's faith system, which is deeply connected to his relationship with his father, I hope to foreground the connections between his reading, writing, and thinking strategies by grouping them into a section called "Rhetorical Strategies." Additionally, I'll trace the effect of academic pragmatism in Jacob's life, providing examples of how it has affected his ability to engage in various courses.

### **Evangelical Fundamentalism**

If you were to meet Jacob, I can guarantee you that he would be wearing a stained and battered Indianapolis Colts cap and an infectious grin. In fact, the only time I've seen him without this exact cap was when he was preparing to head to Church. Other parts of his wardrobe change subtly – it might be Wrangler jeans one day, sweatpants the next – but the hat remains eternal. I asked him about the hat in our final interview. Specifically, I asked him whether he was still going to keep wearing the hat despite the fact that the Colts had waived injured superstar Quarterback Peyton Manning. Jacob assured me that he would never stop wearing the hat even though he disagreed with their decision and knew that they would be in a "rebuilding phase" for a few years. Clearly, being a Colts fan is a part of his identity, and he will remain loyal to the team no matter what. Similarly, Jacob would say that faith and family are two of his strongest priorities. As we'll see, he has been more thoroughly disappointed by members of his family and his faith community than he ever will be by a professional sports team. Nevertheless, he remains stubbornly loyal.

My first interview with Jacob took place in a steakhouse just off the OTC campus where I work. As we got to know each other over burgers and fries, Jacob told me about his childhood, his faith, and his father. It became immediately clear to me that he had suffered tremendous physical abuse and had been bounced from foster home to foster home throughout his childhood. In fact, Jacob's father finally lost a prolonged custody battle because he struck Jacob hard enough to require medical attention. A prolonged quotation from my first interview with Jacob describes this situation and evidences the offhand manner Jacob adopts when speaking of his mistreatment:

It was March 28<sup>th</sup>. I got fired, and that set off a string of events that amounted to April 1<sup>st</sup> at two-thirty in the morning I was in the back of a DFS car driving to WCCH [Wright County Children's Home] in Norwood, Missouri because my dad had punched me in the face and sent me into the other room, about ten feet – airmail! So ... I was back in foster care, and I've been here ever since. We've tried visits, and, um, they just don't work.

I was taken aback by Jacob's casual descriptions of abuse, but I was even more surprised when I asked him to tell me about a person he deeply admired, the kind of person who modeled personality and character traits he hoped to develop.

His response, taken again from that first interview, might seem predictable in retrospect, but at the time it startled and confused me:

Not the entire person, but my dad because, well, he's my dad, so you know I admire him. And, I don't model how he acts in certain situations. But some of the advice, and you know, seeing him react in certain situations. It's like, yeah, that's how I want to do it. But mostly what I learned from my parents about parenting is how not to handle this situation.

Confused, I pressed him to be a little clearer about his admiration for his father. His attempt to clarify only muddled the waters further:

Just what he lives his life by. His ethics and his morals. Yeah, when he gets mad, he blows gaskets bad, but when he doesn't he has very, very good morals. You know, always kept me in Church. I don't think there was a Sunday we missed more than one in a row.

Jacob's ability to gloss over his father's serial abuse (and serial philandering) was compromised near the end of my year-long study when his father was convicted of incest and statutory rape for repeatedly molesting Jacob's sixteen-year-old stepsister. In our follow-up interview, Jacob spoke about the matter at some length and with some obvious emotional strain. Reflecting on the seven-year prison term his father was facing, Jacob told me that he still loved his dad, and suggested that his father hadn't really been himself for the last few years:

The Dad I had when I was younger and the Dad now are not the same person. He's changed completely because of his diabetes and his thyroid – all these medical things that he uses as crutches instead of saying, "I need to do something with my life." He's forty-something, and has the healthcare of an eighty-year-old.

Jacob's inability to navigate the disparity between his deep admiration for his father and the man's criminal record eventually caused him to view his dad as two different people. In all this, his fondness for his father never wavered. In fact, Jacob refers to a number of different women as his "mother," so that I often had to stop him and ask him exactly which mother he meant. He never uses the term "Mom" to describe his biological mother, preferring instead "biological mother." When he uses the term "father," or "Dad," however, he always means his biological



father. I took this as evidence that none of his male foster parents (many of whom he admired and who seem to have treated him well) ever supplanted his father's influence.

Passages from two personal essays Jacob wrote during his first semester in developmental composition illustrate how strongly he feels about his biological mother. In the first essay, Jacob's instructions were to describe a scene from his home. He chose to write about a home he had lived in for two years with his biological mother. The house he describes feels strangely vacant; it's as if Jacob doesn't want to refer to her even in his writing. It's also a place of despair and hopelessness, where the "wood paneled walls seemed almost suffocating," and "the knots in the walls seemed to act as vacuum hose nozzles [...] suck[ing] all the life and fun out." The kitchen in this home is lit by a bulb which is "more of a fly catcher," and the entire home was "full of memories yet [...] full of fear." Jacob's description of the piece is eerily reminiscent of a horror movie in that the home is empty, but somehow the reader keeps expecting a horrifying figure to pop into the screen. He closes by saying that his room "gave off a sickening dying feeling when entered."

That description of a home contrasts strongly with a foster home that Jacob describes in a short autobiographical story. The foster home feels like a bustling place, and Jacob's description begins with morning chores as he feeds the chickens and cleans the dog kennel. After caring for the animals, Jacob wakes the other foster children and begins to prepare their breakfast. Since Jacob is not very knowledgeable about cooking, he ends up burning toast. His following encounter with Lisa, a new foster mother, differs dramatically from his description of his biological mother's home:

I must have looked like a dummy. My jaw had to be on the floor because I was expecting to get yelled at for being a stupid, snot nosed, twelve year old and the toast thrown at me

but no she just told me how to do it correctly and with a slight grin and a soft tone. I then felt accepted into my new home. I knew I was somewhere where I was loved and cared for, not like my other foster homes, I ran to her tearing up, but I did not cry, and I gave her a big hug and said a sentence that affected her as much as me, I think, by the look in her eyes. “I love you mom and thanks for telling me how to do it right.” I said smiling. It felt great to feel so loved.

I pointed out the differences between these stories to Jacob in a casual conversation, and he said that his biological mother was a cold and unaffectionate woman. She always made it clear to him that he was unwanted. Lisa, on the other hand, accepted his hug and spoke gently to him. In that way, she was like Jacob’s father, who – when not angry or drunk – often hugged and praised his children.

This prolonged discussion of Jacob’s difficult and inconsistent relationship with his father is important because Jacob’s love for his father and his faith are inextricably intertwined. As he said, it was his dad who took him to Church. In fact, Jacob’s dad pastored a small country church when Jacob was very young and was known (according to Jacob) for his ability to sing Southern Gospel music as a member of several well-regarded quartets. (It will also prove important in the next section because the repeated discrediting of Jacob’s father, a key authority figure in his life, may have caused some of the epistemological unsettling that he evidences.)

Throughout the year, Jacob repeatedly presented me with proofs of his faith. I never felt as if he was proselytizing – it was more as if he felt a need to justify his beliefs. (Additionally, I think he wanted to test out some of his apologetical ideas. In our midway interview, for example, he explained the difference between micro- and macro-evolution to me, suggesting that the former was scientific fact and the latter completely unproven.) Of the proofs he discussed, a

supernatural vision he experienced as a child and described in our first interview was perhaps the most impactful:

I was four-years-old. Crazy. The day I learned to tie my shoes. We were living down by the waterfront in Washington, Missouri. We lived on the Missouri river. There was a river, a set of train tracks, and then a little hill with woods on it, and then it was our house. My mother had a new boyfriend – she had a lot of those. She had a new one, and I didn't like him at all. Something just wasn't right about him. [...] I didn't sleep real easy a lot of nights. And then one night I was dead asleep. My brother and I shared a room [...] and he [Jacob's brother] woke me up. And I was like "John, what are you waking me up for? I'm finally sleeping good." And he pointed to the doorway, and there was an angel standing there – must have been six-two or six-three. So, for people who can question it, whether God exists, I can't question it, so I accept it as fact and build upon it.

Jacob's vision is evidence of his belief in the validity of personal revelation, a hallmark of the charismatic wing of American evangelicalism. In fact, the church he attends, Tri-Lakes Church, is a member of the Assemblies of God, a denomination which practices the charismatic gifts of prophecy, supernatural healing, and glossolalia<sup>25</sup>. Doctrinally-speaking they fit squarely into the evangelical tradition. The denomination's doctrinal statement suggests that they also ascribe to a literal, handbook-model vision of the Bible: "The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments,

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<sup>25</sup> The Assemblies of God is a rapidly growing denomination headquartered in Springfield, Missouri. Their influence is considerable in the Missouri Ozarks since both Evangel University and the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary are located in Springfield. Additionally, James River Assembly, an AG mega-church which is one of the fastest growing in America, is located in Ozark, Missouri about twenty minutes north of Branson.

are verbally inspired of God and are the revelation of God to man, the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct” (“Official Creed”).

I think Jacob’s experience is characteristic of the way that many devoutly evangelical students feel when attending secular institutions of higher learning. It’s as if they’re citizens of another country. I’m reminded of the words to an old spiritual: “I’m just a poor, wayfaring stranger. // I’m travelling through this world of woe.” As the song suggests, one strategy for coping with the sense of unease or displacement in this life is to focus on the next: “I’m only going over Jordan. // I’m only going over home.” Similarly, evangelical students may not see a need or possibility for fully integrating their academic and spiritual selves. They don’t have a means of defending the things they believe most deeply, so they sit quietly, take notes, and disengage entirely from the intellectual pursuits going on all around them. Examples in the next section will illustrate how completely Jacob is able to separate his educational pursuits from his actual beliefs.

### **Rhetorical Strategies**

For Jacob, there is a clear correlation between his evangelical faith and his approach to classroom debates. Like many students from a fundamentalist background, he makes decisions based upon two criteria: those truths that are self-evident and those truths that can be arrived at through a close reading of Biblical passages. As we have seen, neither criteria is rhetorically effective in a classroom setting since self-evident truths are, by their very nature, indefensible, and Biblical passages don’t have much weight when used in an argument with unbelievers. As I’ll demonstrate in several examples, the result is that Jacob repeatedly finds himself unable to

engage meaningfully in classroom debates. Sensing the rhetorical inadequacy of his proofs, Jacob often avoids classroom debate, opting instead to sit quietly in the back of the classroom. This disengagement from the intellectual stimulus of the classroom presents a challenge to the researcher since none of Jacob's writing is of a particularly argumentative bent. This is because Jacob's developmental-level coursework focused on expository and narrative writing, and also because he didn't complete the first semester of college-level composition so that he wasn't able to provide me with any significant samples of argumentative or source-based writing.

In his other classes, Jacob was just as careful to avoid making philosophical or ethical arguments. One example of this avoidance, took place in Jacob's BIO 110: Introduction to Life Science course. For Jacob, a literal interpretation of the book of Genesis completely disproves the theory of evolution – or at least the macroevolution of species. As he explained in our follow-up interview, when presented with scientific evidence for evolution, he dutifully memorizes the testable information while distancing himself intellectually from the classroom:

I read a book during the evolution lecture, and I got in trouble for it. I was reading Frank Peretti<sup>26</sup> during [the instructor's] class, and he got mad. He was like, "If you'd like to read, go out in the hallway." And I was just like, the first three sentences you said were okay -- the rest I'm just zoning out. So I put the book away, and I kind of zoned out, looking at the screen. [...] I heard, but I didn't listen. It went in my ears, but not in my brain. [...] I knew what I had to know for the test, and I aced the test. And in the lab, I

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<sup>26</sup> The books of Frank Peretti are among Jacob's favorites. He mentioned them several times in interviews and evidently has read them repeatedly since he first discovered them at the age of twelve. Peretti's books, especially the bestsellers *This Present Darkness* and *Piercing the Darkness*, describe battles between angels and demons in cinematic detail so that the books operate like thrillers while espousing theological principles. Peretti, like Jacob, is a member of the Assemblies of God.

did what I had to do to pass the lab, but I don't believe it. And when I got out of there, I just forgot it.

During that same interview, I asked him about the difference between his biology teacher's lecture and his political science teacher's lecture. In both instances, he disagreed with the material being presented. In political science, he'd relished the opportunity for debate; in biology, however, he'd simply shut up and checked out. He wasn't able to explain this inconsistency, but it seemed clear to me that he felt able to make an argument in political and economic debates because (armed by Fox News) he was able to express a consistent stance that relied on pragmatism and a classically conservative understanding of human nature. In Biology he found himself ill-equipped epistemologically because his beliefs about the origins of life are predicated on his understanding of the Bible – an understanding that he knows isn't a sufficient defense in an academic setting. Had he been forced to write about evolution in his biology class, he might have found himself in a compromising situation. Since he wasn't forced to express an opinion, he opted to distance himself intellectually from the material he was learning and remain silent.

Paradoxically, the same habits of mind that kept Jacob from debating his biology teacher are more readily applied to the subject matter of a political science course, so he found himself more able to engage with classroom debate in that course. When Jacob and I discussed that political science class, we were sitting in the uncooled lobby of a garage, waiting for the oil to be changed in my car and wiping sweat off our foreheads. (It was difficult to schedule our follow-up interview, so we agreed to talk while we ran errands together.) Our conversation ranged from used cars to the Indianapolis Colts. Eventually, the heat and humidity wore on us and conversation faltered. The television mounted in the corner was set to FOX News with the

volume turned down. Seeing that the program had caught Jacob's attention, I asked him whether he watched the news. He did. In fact, Jacob watches Fox News, and he entertained me for a few moments by imitating the inaudible voice of the program's talking head. Although he views himself as politically unaffiliated, he typically votes Republican because of his belief that abortion is murder. When asked to defend that belief, he referenced the Declaration of Independence – although he called it the Constitution -- arguing that “every person has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” I pressed him a bit further, asking how he knew that a fetus was a person. Although he acknowledged that his understanding of certain Biblical passages was key to his personal understanding, he also made an argument from scientific principles: “Things that grow and have a heartbeat are alive.” Although he was glossing over the difference between “life” and “personhood,” it's clear that Jacob felt more comfortable employing a variety of rhetorical strategies when discussing abortion.

Jacob's determination to cling to a single authority and his pragmatic bent served him better in that course than they did in biology. For example, there is a clear parallel between Jacob's philosophical stances, which rely on literal-minded readings of scripture and his political stances, which rely on literal-minded readings of the Constitution. Any talk of a “fluid constitution,” which lends itself to interpretation and re-interpretation by successive generations is heresy to Jacob, who argues from the original text and the original text only. Similarly, Jacob's fondness for pragmatism is combined with the fundamentalist doctrine of the fallibility of humanity so that he often perceived his political science teacher's ideas as utopian in that they relied on a pollyannaish understanding of human nature.

Although these ideas indicate more rhetorical sophistication than Jacob displays elsewhere, he is still reticent to employ them in a classroom setting. It may be that after a year of

meetings with me, he is simply more comfortable with me than with his teachers and therefore more able to argue convincingly. For example, in the fall of 2011, Jacob was enrolled in COM 105, Public Speaking. When assigned a persuasive speech of five to seven minutes, he initially planned to give a speech on abortion. As he demonstrated at the garage, he is capable of arguing his pro-life position from a variety of supports. Nevertheless, he became increasingly uneasy as the deadline for giving the speech neared, eventually deciding to change his topic. The topic he settled on, the need for all high school graduates to attend college, provided him with the opportunity to build an argument around economic reasons, thereby avoiding the philosophical and ethical complexities of his earlier topic. It's hard to think of a less controversial topic than the one he chose – especially since he gave the speech to a room full of college students in an economically depressed area.

It should be noted that other Bible-believing Christians who ascribe to differing interpretations of key passages could conceivably be convinced by Jacob's argumentative strategies – at least there would be some common scriptural ground from which to argue. Jacob, however, isn't really aware of denominational distinctions, and, in my conversations with him, he tended to assume that all Christians would share his views. He also believes that all non-Christians would oppose him on most issues he deems important. This "us and them" mentality explains, in part, why he views his biology instructor as non-Christian despite the fact that the instructor regularly attends a local Church and routinely mentions his faith in class. In fact, I had a conversation several years ago with the biology instructor in which he explained his belief in theistic evolution and asked for advice about handling students with a fundamentalist worldview in a secular institution. Perhaps Jacob missed all of that teacher's references to faith (Jacob's



attendance in that class was not stellar.) Perhaps those references simply didn't compute since Jacob is likely to assume that anyone who teaches evolution has no faith system.

Jacob's lack of awareness of competing interpretations of Biblical passages is profound and seems indicative of the "Biblicism" that Christian Smith describes. Once, for example, Jacob and I had a casual conversation in which we discussed the charismatic gifts – Jacob has spoken in tongues and witnessed supernatural healings. When I tried to explain why some other protestant denominations didn't believe that the charismatic gifts could still be legitimately practiced, he was thoroughly confused. Again, I was struck by the dualism of his worldview; he hadn't really considered the beliefs of other Christian groups. In this respect, Jacob's thinking could be characterized as dogmatic since it seems clear to him that the Bible contains all the answers to life's questions and presents a single accurate interpretation. Like most dogmatics, he also displays a clear (albeit compassionate) "us and them" mentality.

Another casual conversation with Jacob just before his marriage suggested how this "us and them" thinking limited his romantic prospects. We began by discussing Jacob's lack of discipline since he was about to be withdrawn from several classes for lack of attendance. (The college has a strict mandatory attendance policy that was implemented three years ago.) I asked him about his dreams for the future and how his academic goals fit into those larger goals. As I have learned, any mention of "the future" turns Jacob's mind towards eschatology, so I shouldn't have been surprised when he said that he didn't think much about the latter stages of his life since he expected the end-times to arrive within a few years<sup>27</sup>. He did express a hope that he

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<sup>27</sup> Jacob's vision of the end-times is bizarrely literal even for a fundamentalist. His emphasis on the second-coming and the end of this world is characteristic of evangelical fundamentalists, but the prophetic passages that reference these events are usually understood metaphorically – even by those who ascribe to an otherwise literal reading of the Bible. Jacob, however, imagines them playing out exactly as described in the book of Revelations.

would be able to get married before the world came to an end. When I asked why, he just grinned in response. Clearly, he was implying that he wanted to experience sex before moving on to heaven. Smiling, I asked him whether he was making any progress towards finding a potential wife. He sighed, and said that it was difficult to find a good woman. When asked what his criteria were, he listed only “good-looking” and “serious about church.” As I asked more questions, it became apparent that “serious about church” actually meant regularly attends the same church as Jacob.

Although he was frustrated by his lack of romantic possibilities in the fall of 2011, Jacob was able to meet a woman who met his criteria, and they were married in the spring of 2012. Jacob’s wife, Kristine, is the daughter of a former Sunday School teacher of Jacob’s. During our extended follow-up interview, Jacob proudly invited me to his new apartment to meet his wife. I shook hands with Kristine, a small watery-eyed blond, while she sat on a couch donated by her parents. As we toured the small, dark apartment, Jacob explained that Kristine was tired because she was attending OTC in the evenings, taking nursing school prerequisites, and working the night-shift at a long-term care facility. To facilitate his wife’s professional goals, Jacob is taking the year off from school to focus on finding a job that can support the two of them. Since his current job, computer support at Kanakuk Kamps, is part-time, his everyday focus is on keeping the apartment clean and quietly playing video games until Kristine wakes in the early afternoon.

### **Academic Pragmatism**

As Jacob’s persuasive speech on the economic reasons for attending college suggests, his chief reason for attending college is to secure a better future for his family. Specifically, he hopes to become a music minister and pastor – like his dad once was. After Kristine finishes

nursing school and secures a better-paying job, he plans to return to OTC, eventually transferring to Evangel University. Although his earlier interviews indicated that he thought, like many of his peers, that the goal of his college coursework was the acquisition of certain discrete bits of knowledge or skillsets, later interviews and questionnaires demonstrate that he may be more aware of the ways that his thinking has changed over the last year. In this way, there are some tentative signs that he is moving out of academic pragmatism into a fuller understanding of the purpose of education. To illustrate that shift, this section will be subdivided chronologically so that Jacob's progress is more apparent.

In our first interview at the steakhouse, Jacob struggled to explain the purpose of a college-level writing class. His answer is muddled since he initially assumes I'm referencing the physical act of writing before moving into a discussion of how to organize an essay:

You're supposed to know how to write, and at least print, hopefully.<sup>28</sup> How to write an essay. How to write pretty much anything your teacher assigns. You've done research papers. You've done résumés. [...] You know how it flows: Intro, conclusion, body. [...] Organization is a big key. You want your paper to flow. And college isn't so much as teaching you new things, but refining what you already know. To make you better. Maybe your flow isn't right. I can't flow a paper at all. I'll sit at a blank paper forever, looking at it, because I don't know how to start it. You want to -- increasing your ratings. Like me, I'm kind of an average writer, I suppose. Y'know I kind of procrastinate a lot.

As I learned in our interviews, Jacob's high school writing instruction had focused on the structure of certain documents, so it makes sense that his understanding of writing – when he's

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<sup>28</sup> This was the first of many times that Jacob assumed by "writing" I meant penmanship. After a year of frequent meetings and discussions that centered on these questions, he still spoke often of his penmanship, noting in our final interview that his wife made fun of his cursive.

not thinking about penmanship – revolves around knowing how to work within different writing forms. He also displays the typical undergraduate guilt over procrastination.

In addition to focusing on structure, Jacob also began the year focusing on fact-driven prose. As he explained in our first interview, his goal was to accumulate all the information and then recite it in an organized manner so that it would “flow.” Explaining why he preferred teacher-assigned topics, he displayed this presentation-of-facts model for writing:

If it's just like write about an experience you had in school, well that's like a ton. That's hard. And then you find one that's funny, and you write about that. But if it's like write me an essay on the social status of India, which would be the caste system, I could do that. I could write you essay after essay because it's like a specific topic that I've been chosen, or been given, and it's easier. [Finding your own topic] is a pain in the butt because I can never find enough facts. So, I'll get like halfway done, and then just run out of facts, and I'm too lazy to go search for more, and then I'll switch topics. And I'll write like three and a half essays on nine topics. And I'll have to pick one and actually write one essay. If you give me one, there's no “Well, I can switch topics because I can't find enough facts.”

This transcription makes it clear that Jacob has no sense of an argumentative purpose for writing. Given his understanding that writing should be either entertaining or matter-of-factly truthful, this lack makes perfect sense.

In a source-supported essay on Alzheimers disease, Jacob took this approach. Citing only two sources, the Macmillan Social Science Library and a personal interview, he recited every fact he had gathered about the disease and packaged these facts into topically divided informative paragraphs. Jacob's instructor, who was teaching a health class, gave him a “D” for

his effort and suggested that the essay “looked like a dictionary entry.”<sup>29</sup> This was an uncannily accurate observation from the instructor since Jacob had taken every fact (carefully and correctly cited) from a single dictionary entry and also borrowed the entry’s organizational scheme for the body of the essay. He had reserved the interview and a brief personal anecdote about his grandmother’s experience with the disease for the introduction.

Jacob’s midway interview, which suggested that writing classes should teach structural templates, and his essay, which sought to clearly relay the relevant facts without any overarching sense of audience or purpose, are both indicative of his understanding that academic writing exists for the purpose of clearly relaying information, but they’re also representative of his emphasis on fact-driven writing rather than writing that has a more exploratory or persuasive emphasis. Rather than engaging in debate and attempting to sway his readers, he attempted to replicate the kind of textbook writing with which he was familiar. I’m listing these as examples of academic pragmatism because they indicate a misunderstanding on Jacob’s part of the purposes of the assignments he’s been given. Presented with an opportunity to explore a topic or convince his readers – an invitation to join a larger conversation – he dutifully recites the appropriate facts.

By the end of the year, Jacob’s interviews and questionnaire responses indicated that he had developed a fuller understanding of the purposes of education. For example, one of his final interview questions asked whether he was “a different kind of thinker as a result of the writing instruction [he had] received.” Jacob’s response indicates that he’s beginning to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the purposes of a composition course: “I was taught to see things

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<sup>29</sup> This marginal comment, although I’m sure it was well-intentioned, is indicative of the difficulty that instructors in other disciplines sometimes have when trying to articulate their sense that an essay lacks a sense of audience awareness or rhetorical purpose.

through all the the shades of light and to think outside the box so I could answer all the questions. Soooo, yea, I do.” That phrase, “all the shades of light” is a promising sign of his increasing ability to approach an issue from a wider variety of perspectives.

Similarly, a question from the final questionnaire asked whether his “college writing courses have been better or worse than [his] high school writing courses.” His response, although guarded, indicates that he is beginning to see the value of personal transformation and the role that rigorous coursework can play in that transformation:

Depends on how you look at it. There were harder so worse in my opinion but they made me a better person and a better thinker so better in the same light. I go with better as my final answer.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to suggesting the intellectually transformative function of education, this answer demonstrates Jacob’s increasing ability to take a nuanced approach to a question. He responded to most of his earlier questionnaires with emphatic, single-word declarations. The tone of this answer, qualified and thoughtful, is as much a testament to his movement away from academic pragmatism as the answer itself.

As I noted in the previous chapter, one of the common criticisms of Perry’s model of cognitive development is that he never makes it clear whether progression through the stages is to be attributed to coursework or a natural process of maturation in students who are of an age where a great deal of sudden change and maturation is to be expected. This confusion about the sources of students’ intellectual changes is especially marked in Jacob’s case. Although he seems to give a great deal of the credit to his teachers, the waters are muddied by the fact that he got married, dropped out of school, and is now trying to support a family. Although I still saw

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<sup>30</sup> The sudden decline in Jacob’s editing skills is probably due to the fact that he answered my final questionnaire via an email sent from his phone.

flashes of the gleeful teenager I'd met a year earlier, Jacob was more likely to talk about current bills and future children than video games by the end of the year.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that he failed all of his classes in the last semester of my study, there are many positive signs that Jacob is increasingly beginning to feel welcome in the academic community. For example, in our final interview, he repeatedly mentioned how eager he was to return to the college. He even sought my advice about payment plans for resolving his debt with financial aid. He wanted to continue making payments on that debt while enrolling in some fall semester classes. When I told him that wasn't possible – his debt had to be paid in full before he could re-enroll – he began wondering aloud whether he could get extra hours at work so that he could make larger payments. That way, he'd be able to pay off the balance over the summer and enroll before fall classes began.

Since Jacob and Kristine have settled in Ozark, Missouri, he is planning to continue his coursework at OTC's Richwood Valley Campus, which is located just a few miles from their little apartment. The prospect of attending a larger campus is daunting to Jacob, however. He told me that he would miss OTC's little Branson Center, a place where he'd begun to feel welcome. In a strange way, Jacob's nervousness about attending a larger campus seems like a positive sign to me since it is rooted in the fact that he had begun to feel more comfortable in our facility. When I asked Jacob why he felt comfortable at the Branson Center, he told me that he knew a lot of people, and he'd really enjoyed his interactions with the faculty – particularly his English instructor, who Jacob thought was funny and able to explain things clearly.

Despite these positive signs that Jacob is beginning to place some value on academic rigor and feel more comfortable in an intellectual environment, it is clear that he will have to find some way of reconciling his faith with his intellect if he is ever to fully engage with his coursework. That process of assimilating the disparate parts of his worldview can be painful and will require some courage. It takes a kind of courage to concede that knowledge is contextualized – to “see things through all the shades of light” – and it takes courage to act in good faith on that knowledge. Fortunately, my friendship with Jacob has convinced me that there’s a great deal of courage concealed behind his ready smile and Colts hat.



## Chapter Four – Brett’s Case Study

### Overview:

If Brett and Jacob, the students who are the focus of this chapter and the previous, were to stand next to each other, it would be difficult to guess that there were many similarities between their lives. As I’ve mentioned, Jacob looks like a stereotypically country student. His ball cap, haircut, even his broad and friendly grin, all suggest rural life. He looks as if he grew up on a farm. Brett, on the other hand, wears his hair long and center-parted so that it obscures most of his face. Typically, he dresses in visibly soiled jeans and anime t-shirts. His eyes are as dark as his hair, and he rarely smiles or speaks more than a few words at a time. During our interviews, I found that I had to be very careful and patient since his reticence sometimes caused me to supply answers before looking to him for confirmation. Eventually, I learned to wait for Brett, allowing him to process each question carefully before responding. Each interview had to be conducted with great delicacy on my part since an ill-timed question could cause him to “clam up.”

I first met Brett in the fall semester of 2010 when he was sent to my office for a conversation about personal hygiene. Several students in his personal computing class had complained about his body odor, and the teacher noticed that he had come to class barefoot. Those bare feet, when combined with the long straight hair, immediately suggested to me that he was attempting to project a counter-cultural, hippie-ish image. When I asked him why he wasn’t wearing shoes, I expected him to defend his right to bare-footedness. Perhaps I expected him to give me a lecture on the working conditions in third-world shoe factories. Instead, he simply blushed and haltingly explained that he had gotten a ride to school with his mother and accidentally left his shoes in the car. Taken aback and not quite knowing how to respond, I

asked him to shower more frequently in the future and make a special effort to remember his shoes. That meeting in my office was the first of many conversations with Brett in which my expectations were confounded. He simply isn't the kind of guy that he looks to be.

In fact, that disconnect between appearance and reality caused me to sometimes suspect that Brett was an unreliable narrator of his own life. Each time, however, that I questioned his veracity, I was proven wrong. For example, he told me in our first interview that he had failed his developmental algebra course because, throughout the entire course, he had never turned in any homework despite completing all of the required problems. He explained, "I didn't kind of like [my math teacher] because I was kind of confused about when to turn in my assignments. Like every time I got in there we'd move on to a different subject, and I'd be like I guess he didn't want them." Since OTC's math curriculum is notoriously difficult, I felt that Brett's explanation was implausible. It seemed to me that he'd simply had difficulty comprehending the material and had decided to quit. In a repeat attempt of the course, however, Brett earned a "B." When I asked him why his second attempt had been so much more successful, he explained that he'd always been able to do the problems; he passed the class the second time because the homework was completed online so that there was no confusion about when to turn it in. This example illustrates how consistently events bore out Brett's explanations of his life, but it also demonstrates how consistently uncomfortable he is in most group settings. Some of this discomfort may be explained by the fact that he was raised in a very remote area and had little childhood interaction with anyone except members of his family.

As he explained in his responses to my first questionnaire, Brett's parents moved from Merced, California to Taneyville, Missouri when he was three. Taneyville, a village of just a few hundred, is extremely remote and can't support its own school system, so the resident

children attend school in Forsyth, the county seat. Brett's dad was a mechanic and his mother is disabled by chronic back and neck pain. Brett's only surviving sibling is an older sister who has struggled with methamphetamine addiction despite frequent stays in residential drug rehabilitation centers. One question on that initial questionnaire asked Brett to "describe his family's financial situation." He responded by saying, "Back then things were fine, currently though, we're struggling, but hanging in there." As I was to learn during our first interview, "back then" refers to the time before the death of his father when Brett was seventeen. The tragic house fire that took his dad's life marked a pivotal moment in Brett's life – especially since Brett feels personally responsible for the fire. When we began meeting to conduct this research, Brett was living with his mother, his sister, and his grandfather. By the time of our final interview, Brett had dropped out of school, gotten a job at Wal-Mart, and moved in with his girlfriend.

It is difficult to overstate how profoundly Brett's home life overshadowed our meetings. He discussed his father's death with me in our first recorded interview. As he explained why he felt responsible for the fire, I tried to suggest that it couldn't really be his fault. His response is worth quoting at some length since it illustrates the degree to which that event has divided his life and shaped his self-image:

He passed away two years ago, and every now and then it starts coming back because I kind of feel responsible of his death because he died in a house fire of smoke inhalation. And the fire was caused by me because I moved furniture up against a wall furnace that was supposed to be disconnected, but it wasn't it turned out. And, it caught fire to furniture and started burning the house down. [...] I had to drag my grandfather out of the house. It still affects me.

A semester after that first interview, Brett referenced the tragedy again when he told me it led to a depression that caused him to fail his classes. Although I repeatedly suggested that counseling might help him to address his feelings, to my knowledge he never sought out any professional help.

In addition to the emotional difficulties presented by this loss, Brett faced other problems at home. I asked him in our second formal interview why he was failing his computer class given that he is very skilled with computers, and he told me that his older sister kept unplugging the home computer while he was working. According to him, his sister was a methamphetamine addict, and her manic fits often turned violent – she had repeatedly struck him with a kitchen pan. He attributed her violence to the fact that she was “always jealous,” and noted that he was “the good kid – believe it or not.” Like many of the students I met, Brett found it nearly impossible to navigate simultaneously the difficulties of school and home – especially since both were sources of incredible stress.

Despite the fact that Jacob and Brett look very different and have had dissimilar (although perhaps equally traumatic) childhoods, the following sections will demonstrate that many of the academic problems that plague rural students affect Brett just as significantly as they do Jacob. The structure of this chapter differs slightly from the previous one since Brett doesn’t adhere to the same faith system as Jacob. I will argue, however, that the cultural effects of evangelical fundamentalism are still evident in his reading strategies, epistemological strategies, and academic pragmatism.

## Reading Strategies

I argued in the second chapter of this study that there is a strong causative link between some students' cultural background in Evangelical Fundamentalism and their reading strategies. In short, I argued that their Church-directed scriptural study constitutes the bulk of their critical reading experience. The result is that they tend to view all of their reading as having either a purely informative or entertaining function. This is a natural outgrowth of what Christian Smith calls "Biblicism," the belief that the Bible lends itself to consistent, matter-of-fact interpretation and should be granted rhetorical primacy in every situation. For these students, texts that lend themselves to this style of interpretation are accepted a priori. Texts that don't appear to relay information in that surface-level manner are typically understood as having only entertainment value. This brief reminder of those twin reading strategies is important here because I will spend the remainder of this section arguing that Brett, despite not adhering to any organized faith system, displays these same strategies in both his reading and writing.

In our first interview, Brett claimed to be a Deist, and provided me with a definition of the term: "It's basically a religion that believes in God. Or, it's like a word that you believe in God but you don't believe that you have to go to Church or take up any other religion in order to, like, find your way into his heart or whatever." His expression at the end of this little speech made it clear that he didn't think much of a faith system that sought to placate God. Answering a question from the first questionnaire, he described his parents' faith in similarly skeptical terms: "Mom's a Christian, or so she claims. Dad was all about the Indian religion, unless he was drunk (then he'd go on a rampage of how there is no God.)" All of Brett's discussions of religion were marked by that same combination of skepticism and agnosticism. That is, he believes in a divine presence, but he is extremely doubtful of any attempt to interact with the divine –

especially those attempts that seem designed to curry favor. In that same first interview, he argued that the purpose of life was to “live ... to the fullest.” When I challenged him to define the term “fullest,” he wandered a bit, saying that he hadn’t “discovered it yet.” As he talked more, I began to see that his understanding of this full life included family, meaningful work, and personal peace. Or, as Brett put it, someone living the full life is “happy with himself.” Brett’s discomfort with organized religion and his inability to explain coherently what he believed were significant departures from the other students in the case study. Most of them were able to articulate (with varying degrees of sophistication) a complete theology.

I’m aware that the argument I’m making here – that Brett displays the same pair of inappropriate reading strategies as my other students despite rejecting organized religion – may discredit my previous assertion that there is a causal link between fundamentalist training and these twin strategies for college reading. It would be easy to assume that Brett’s experience undermines my other findings. It seems more probable to me, however, that Brett serves as an example of the way that these reading strategies have become culturally endemic. That is, although Brett disavows every form of institutionalized religion, he still received all of his formal education in a culture that is saturated with religious sentiment and thought. Beyond this speculation, I can’t say with any surety how his strategies developed. The similarities, however, between Brett and the fundamentalist students are profound.

Like Jacob, Brett has a tendency to misunderstand the rhetorical purposes of both the things he’s reading and the things he’s writing. For example, when asked to develop a short, argumentative essay about a topic of local concern, Brett chose to write about the Shepherd of the Hills Fish Hatchery located at the base of Table Rock Lake Dam in Branson. His essay, which was supposed to include an introduction, a conclusion, and three body paragraphs, is less

than a half page. Additionally, it lacks any sense of argument. Instead, Brett chose to simply reorganize a series of facts that he'd found on the Hatchery's website. I've included his full introduction here since it illustrates both his inability to develop an idea and how thoroughly his essay is focused on a recitation of facts rather than any persuasive end:

The Fish Hatchery is a surprising place. Over one million fish are produced at the Fish Hatchery every year and are sent to various places. The Fish Hatchery is an important part of the aquaculture.

When Brett dropped the essay off at my office, he delivered a freshly graded copy. Glancing at the grade, which was fifteen points out of a possible thirty, I asked what had gone wrong. Brett responded by telling me that he wasn't really sure. He'd been able to find plenty of good information, and thought that he had cited his sources correctly.

Brett's bewilderment about that low grade is indicative of his inability to understand the purposes of the assignment. Although the teacher's handwriting was nearly illegible, he did suggest in a marginal comment that the essay hadn't accomplished the goals of the assignment. When I asked Brett what the goals of the assignment were, he said that he knew it was supposed to be more argumentative, but he couldn't find anything to argue. It seems clear that in lieu of choosing an appropriately controversial topic, he'd settled on one that allowed him to employ a strategy with which he was very comfortable – the simple recitation of discrete facts. Like Jacob's Alzheimer's paper, Brett's Fish Hatchery piece was more of an encyclopedia entry than an essay.

Similarly, Brett struggled with a creative project assigned in his second attempt at English 050, Basic Composition II. The instructor began the project by explaining the difference between abstract and concrete nouns. After the students had compiled a list of abstract nouns,

which were recorded on the board, the instructor produced a box of items – a cola can, a stapler, a paperback book, etc. Each student was randomly assigned an abstract noun and an object. The students were supposed to develop an extended essay-length analogy comparing the two. Brett was given the task of comparing a pair of scissors to confusion, and he found this assignment unworkably difficult. In our second formal interview he discussed his feelings of frustration with that particular assignment: “I tried, but I failed. I didn’t feel like turning that in, so I burned it. [...] I burn all my failed things.” He cited the assignment as an example of the sort of “abstract” thinking that he feels is one of his greatest weaknesses.

During the year I spent collecting data, Brett told me repeatedly that he was very uncomfortable with assignments he deemed “abstract.” In using this word, he seemed to be suggesting that he was uncomfortable with any sort of assignment that asked him to move beyond his literal-minded approach to writing. For example, when asked in his first interview to describe the goals of a writing class, he responded that it was “mainly abstract thinking.” Pressed to explain his difficulty with that sort of thinking, he recalled an instance from his high school English class: “It’s just basically kind of impossible for me to come up with abstract ideas. In High School, the English teacher there would literally place a chair in front of me and say ‘What does this represent to you?’ And I honestly couldn’t tell her.” To a surprising degree, Brett sees himself as incapable of using language to reason, to explore ideas, or to convince a reader of the validity of his viewpoint. As a result, he tends to become anxious when given an assignment that asks him to perform one of those rhetorical functions, and he’s likely to burn his attempt or simply submit a piece that he knows is lacking.

In our second formal interview, Brett described the anxiety he experienced when trying to create assignments that weren’t “comfortable – within [his] perimeter.” Brett’s description of his



feelings about those assignments suggests the inadequacy he feels when attempting academic writing: “I’ll do it and look it over and see crap, and I’ll just not turn it in. It’s hesitant. [...] I feel like if I’m going to turn in something I want them to be able to enjoy it – not just say, ‘Uh-oh, look at this.’” It’s as if Brett is aware that there are a variety of other rhetorical strategies besides the two he routinely employs, but they seem inaccessible to him. This discrepancy between what he knows he’s supposed to be doing and what he feels capable of is the source of a great deal of anxiety.

It should be noted that Brett feels incapable of performing many of the writing tasks he’s assigned, but his perception of inadequacy shouldn’t be understood as evidence of any pervasive cognitive deficiency. Although his placement test scores placed him in developmental math, English, and reading, he wasn’t severely deficient in any area. On the contrary, he was within a few points of testing into college-level work in all three areas. Similarly, he was able to pass some courses that are regularly considered very difficult by other students. For example, he mentioned in our second interview that he had really enjoyed his Introduction to Psychology course – even though his instructor is widely regarded as one of the most rigorous at our little campus. He also listed that course as one that “taught [him] the most.” Additionally, most of the writing samples that Brett gave me were well edited. In fact, Brett feels very confident when it comes to the basic mechanics of writing. He told me in our first interview that he felt confident in his ability to avoid basic sentence-level errors: “Punctuation, grammar -- I have no problem with those. I do really well in that.” So, his lack of confidence isn’t indicative of an overriding lack of intelligence or lack of basic writing skills. In fact, he feels very comfortable and confident when writing stories.

The disparity between Brett's feelings about narrative pieces and all other forms of academic writing is incredible. It was a theme he returned to again and again in our interviews. In our first formal interview, he told me that he had mixed feelings about repeating ENG 050, Basic Composition "because of the whole abstract writing thing. It basically gets to me." He was, however, looking forward to narrative assignments; as he said, "making up stories is kind of what I do. Like, if they ask me to write a story or whatever, it's easier for me to do ... basically I feel comfortable with it." He returned to that same theme in our second formal interview when he told me that he preferred the instruction of his second teacher because "if she has an example, normally it's stuff about her personal life. Like, for instance, she was talking about her cat – how she ran over it on accident because it liked to stay up in her tires. [...] It was a mixture between a narrative or a descriptive." In that same interview, Brett told me that he would probably continue to write fiction after college, dabbling with short stories or graphic novels.

One of Brett's more successful pieces of writing during his three repeated attempts at ENG 050 was a personal essay about a playground fight in fourth grade entitled, "First Fight." It chronicles Brett's response to repeated playground bullying. After a classmate deliberately knocked cookies out of his hand, Brett tackled him, punching wildly until teachers came to break up the fight. Brett received an "A" for that personal essay, and his ability to develop a narrative scene is in stark contrast to his inability to develop an expository or argumentative paragraph. He is able to detail paragraphs, describing the setting and characters effectively. As the story begins, Brett's bus driver arrives to pick him up for the final day of fourth grade, and Brett's descriptions of the bus driver and his own interaction with friends display his flair for comic writing:

He drove up, halfway on the curve, and opened the door. "Comin or stayin" he asked with the twitchy look on his face. He had crazy white hair, a dark gray beard, and was

wearing sunglasses, a red long sleeve shirt, blue jeans, and white shoes. He reminded me of a well dressed hobo. “We’ve been through this Mr. White” I said with an anger tone in my voice as I climbed up the creaky steps of the old bus. I was walking to the back of the bus to where one of my best friends was. “Hi Sean” I said as I plopped next to him. “Hi [Brett]” he said in his British accent. He was a tall kid with a messed up front tooth, and brown hair and brown eyes. I never knew why he had a British accent because his parents had no sign of an accent anywhere. The bus sputtered, kicked, and took off for school. I held on for dear life as Mr. White zigzagged through roads, picking up children by suddenly slamming on his breaks and flinging open the doors, saying the same thing to the others as he did with me. “You ever curious why Mr. White drives this way” I asked Sean with curiosity in my voice. “Maybe because his way of driving makes everyone remain in their seat” he responded with a weird look in his eye. “Yeah, that’s true. I guess bad driving is all you need for us to remain in our seats.” We both laughed loudly at this thought.

When contrasted with the curt and matter-of-fact first paragraph of Brett’s Fish Hatchery essay, this paragraph is noteworthy in that Brett is able to develop an authorial voice that seems comfortable and confident. Throughout the piece, his interactions with classroom friends are also marked by a sense of familiarity and confidence.

Interestingly, however, teachers in Brett’s memories of fourth grade are rarely named and don’t feel like fully-developed characters. Instead, they are typically employed for comic effect, so that we’re given a crazy bus driver, the lady teacher with “skunk hair,” and “the tall skinny teacher.” The one exception is Mr. Graves, the school’s principal, to whom Brett is sent after the

fight. In this case, I think Brett employs the man's name and honorific because it helps him to create a foreboding atmosphere as he's waiting in the hallway to speak to the principal:

My heart started to beat really fast, almost as if my heart were about to explode out of my chest. I sat in the uncomfortable chair for what seemed like forever. I noticed the name plate on the door: "*Mr. Graves.*" The door creaked open and I heard a demanding voice telling me to get in there.

Brett's use of the principal's name displays a surprisingly sophisticated ability to create an atmosphere through the use of subtle narrative technique. This ability is consistent with his belief that he is a relatively skilled fiction writer, but a very poor "abstract" writer.

For the purposes of this project it is perhaps more important that Brett tends to divide writing into these two types – "abstract" or narrative – than his confidence as a writer in either mode. When pressed, he is unable to define his use of the descriptor "abstract," but it seems clear to me that he is deeply uncomfortable voicing an opinion of any sort, and he is using the term as a catch-all to describe writing that has a purpose beyond superficial, sensual description or definition. For example, in our first interview he said that he was "more of an observer" preferring to reserve judgment on moral issues or in conversations with friends "because I think of every consequence that could happen before making a judgment." Using Perry's scheme, we might classify Brett as a late-stage multiplistic thinker since he displays a reflective ability, but lacks a framework for decision-making or truth-creation. In the next section of this chapter, I will explore Brett's reluctance to voice an opinion or argue his case. As in this section, I'll demonstrate in the next that Brett tends towards the same kind of intellectual problems as his peers – albeit for very different reasons.

## Epistemological Strategies

As I've mentioned, it can be very difficult to get Brett to make an assertion of any sort. This is especially true of his answers to questions about himself. Often, he'll mumble monosyllabically from behind that curtain of hair, without really committing himself to an opinion. It was easy to sense his discomfort with my questions, and this discomfort didn't pass or ease over the course of the year we spent talking. I believe this is characteristic of his interactions in most professional or academic situations. For example, he told me in our final formal interview that he really enjoyed working nights at Wal-Mart in the warehouse because "I can like work without seeing anyone. As long as I get my work done, the managers will leave me alone." I asked him what he thought about during those long eight-hour shifts, and he was characteristically noncommittal: "I don't know. I just like kind of zone out until I'm done. Sometimes I even forget to take my break, and the managers get mad." It seems as if he enjoys the job because its monotony allows him to disengage emotionally and intellectually.

Some of that characteristic discomfort seems rooted in a pervasive lack of self-confidence. (It is telling that Brett's description of the "full life" from our first interview included the idea that a person could be "happy with himself.") I will argue, however, that there is another component to his indecision. It seems to me that Brett is uniquely situated within his culture of origin in that he is a constant outsider. As I walked the halls of our little campus last fall, I would often catch a glimpse of Brett through an open classroom door. Invariably, he was sitting alone in the back corner, his head down, long hair obscuring his face. (Jacob, on the other hand, was often surrounded by friends, his excited laughter rising above their conversations.) Brett told me in his first interview that he was raised in an isolated manner with only his parents for company, and it seems to me that he has maintained that isolation into adulthood.

In addition to the social distance that he maintains from his fellow students, Brett differs widely from them intellectually. As we've seen, Brett is uncharacteristically dismissive of faith systems that seek to interact actively with God – or, as he put it “to find your way into his heart.” Unfortunately, this leaves him in a kind of epistemological vacuum. If, as I have argued, Jacob and many other students build their political opinions and moral codes around the tenets of their faith, they may find themselves unable to form a coherent argument when they sense that the proofs they have accepted aren't adequate to the rhetorical occasion. Brett, on the other hand, is in much worse shape since he can't articulate any sort of belief system. Raised in a culture that grants rhetorical primacy to arguments based on a system of scriptural interpretation that he rejects, he is fundamentally unable to build an argument. The result is that he is more consistently multiplistic in his thinking than his peers – as evidenced by his inability to make a judgment and his corresponding ability to “think of every consequence.”

Let me be very clear here. I'm not suggesting that it is impossible to make a truth-claim without some religious faith or sensibility. I'm only arguing that Brett is unfamiliar with any other method of forming a personal philosophy. Since the culture of the Ozarks tends to be fairly homogenous – as evidenced by longtime residents' frequent assumption that everyone in a given group is likely to be an evangelical Christian – he hasn't been exposed to other systems of truth-making. The result is that he is reluctant to defend a claim of any sort.

In fact, the one moral claim that Brett expressed in all our time together concerned drug use. In our first interview, he told me that he was often uncomfortable “speaking up” when he thought someone was in the wrong. I pushed him to describe an instance when he would feel the need to speak out, when he wouldn't be able to keep his thoughts to himself any longer. His response was that it “depends on the circumstance.” He did agree, however, that some things

were definitely wrong: “Like if someone offered me drugs, I’d say ‘No.’ Obviously. It’d be kind of like a pushed-too-far thing.” Since Brett’s sister has had a long history with methamphetamine addiction, this answer might seem to be rooted solely in his personal trauma. In that sense it can be seen as an example of dogmatic thought in that he relies on the authority of his personal experience to make this claim. It seems telling, however, that drug use is “obviously” wrong to him. It’s a self-apparent truth that doesn’t require any justification. In this instance, Brett’s personal experience is in accord with the cultural messages he has received, and the result is a truth claim that doesn’t need to be defended because in his experience it has never been opposed. In that sense it’s not really a claim at all – just a statement of a widely agreed-upon fact.

This inability to form an argument was also displayed in Brett’s public speaking class. His instructor came to me to discuss Brett’s bizarre behavior after he repeatedly refused to choose a topic for a five to seven minute argumentative speech. According to her, all Brett had to do was write his name and topic on a piece of paper, but he stubbornly refused to comply. I asked Brett about this refusal in our second formal interview, and he told me that “it was too many decisions to choose from. It’s not like I know anything right off the bat. I’m not more of an instantly think kind of person. And, even when I have time to process it, I have no ideas what I want to do.” He echoed this idea in that same interview when he was talking about his difficulty choosing a topic for an argumentative essay: “I was debating on so many things to write about, and I’m not a very decisive person.” Unlike Jacob, who knows what he believes, but feels that some claims might not be defensible in an academic setting, Brett has no criteria for evaluating the suitability of an argumentative topic. Although he never said it in so many words, I am convinced that this indecision is a reflection of his lack of self-confidence, his dearth

of argumentative strategies, and his multiplistic orientation. Since his truths are either self-evident or entirely relative, he simply doesn't have any sense of how to defend his position.

In conversation after conversation with Brett, I couldn't shake the feeling that he was deeply uncomfortable at the college. He always avoided eye contact, and his answers to my questions were stumbling, painful, and indefinite. When I asked teachers about his performance in their classes, they often replied by noting the same two things: He smells bad, and he never says anything. Clearly, Brett's classmates and instructors were just as uncomfortable as he was. In our second formal interview, however, Brett did tell me that he felt that things were improving, but that he should have waited before entering college: "I just didn't feel like I belonged here at first [...] I think I should have waited rather than just get out of high school and just jump right into college." He even suggested that the necessary process of acculturation when entering a new place is difficult for him: "Because I was new, and that's how I am with everything. Whenever I started out in Taneyville, Forsyth, Branson I did horrible my first year." Eventually, however, new situations become less stressful for him because "you get used to the routine." Since he indicated that he didn't feel adequately prepared for college, I asked him why he began when he did. His answers to that question demonstrate a profound degree of academic pragmatism since they are rooted in his understanding of his familial responsibilities rather than any sense of personal or intellectual change.

### **Academic Pragmatism**

Since Brett indicated that he felt that he had entered college before he was socially or intellectually ready, I asked him why he had, what his goals were. His response was that it was an attempt to "get [his mother] off his back." He then qualified this remark by adding that he



“kind of did want [his] degree though – just to get it, get out, actually find a job. And, if possible, a few years later to come advance to whatever I want to do – which I’m not really sure anymore.” The problems with this goal are twofold. First, Brett couldn’t see a direct correlation between his stated career goal, to become a computer programmer, and his composition courses. Second, he was beginning to doubt whether computer programming was a career that would satisfy him.

In our first recorded interview, Brett talked about his frustration with courses that didn’t seem to provide the kind of knowledge or learning that was directly related to his interest in computers. When I asked him to list a course that was frustrating in that way, he thought immediately of composition:

English is one of them. [...] Basically, I didn’t see what the point is if I’m going to go into a degree that has basically nothing to do with English. I mean, I’m going to be coding, of course, but that’s more like math than anything else. [...]

Similarly, Brett was frustrated in his last semester at the college with the requirement that he take Public Speaking, which seemed like another irrelevant course that wouldn’t directly contribute to his career success.

Like Jacob and Brett, many of the students I interviewed mentioned Public Speaking when we spoke about courses that were frustrating or difficult. This is probably because the college’s Public Speaking courses require students to develop argumentative speeches – a project that is daunting to these students for all the epistemological reasons I’ve mentioned. For Brett, it is even more stressful since it requires him to engage with a crowd in a way that makes him deeply uncomfortable. In our midway interview, he mentioned that he felt “that [he] had nothing important to say.” The result was that he “stuttered a lot, and the people on the front row were

laughing.” The combination of his epistemological uncertainty, social awkwardness, and lack of self-confidence made Public Speaking a kind of ongoing nightmare for him.

Uncharacteristically, he voiced an opinion, suggesting that Public Speaking should not be a required course in his degree program since it wasn’t part of the working life of a computer programmer.

Like many of his rural peers, Brett has an inaccurate understanding of the skills and abilities that will be required of him in the workplace. The demand for the so-called “soft skills” has been a focus of a great deal of recent scholarly attention in business schools, and it has become a truism that critical thinking and communication skills are required for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. A recent study funded by Michigan State University’s College of Agriculture and Natural Resources determined that these “soft skills” are necessary for “competitive employment” even in fields where they might seem less necessary like “agriculture, natural resources, and related careers” (Crawford 1). These findings are of particular importance to those rural students who hope to find employment in more traditionally rural occupations like farming. Of course, those soft skills will be at least as necessary in Brett’s chosen field of computer programming.

When I tried to suggest that the skills imparted by a liberal arts education – and, more specifically, a composition course – are necessary in the workplace, he entirely misunderstood my point. Using his own term, I asked him to list an instance in which he would need to be able to do “abstract thinking” in the workplace. The only example he could think of was in response to the traditional interview question, “Can you see yourself working here?” His response to that hypothetical question was “At the current rate, yeah. In the future maybe I’d move on. [...] I’m not a fortune teller.” In this instance, I’d provided Brett with an invitation to enter into one of

the traditional scripts of the job interview. The question is designed to provide the applicant with an opportunity to suggest ways that he or she might be a good fit. In short, it's a situation that calls for abstract, contextualized thought. Characteristically, Brett interpreted the question concretely and ignored the opportunity to advance an argument – even on his own behalf. It was clear to me that Brett knew he'd answered the question incorrectly since he grinned at the impropriety of his imaginary response. Still, this bit of role-playing illustrates how much of a challenge any real job interview would present for Brett.

Like many students, Brett was motivated, in part, to enroll in college courses because of the promise of improved employability. That is, he had a future financial incentive. Unlike the other students in the case study, Brett was frank about the fact that he also had an immediate financial incentive. In our midway interview, he told me that he had been disappointed because he had understood that enrolling as a full-time student would allow him to remain eligible for Social Security benefits:

The whole financial aid issue was in gear, and we needed income, so I decided, “Okay, I’ll just go to college.” Because we were hoping to keep getting our Social Security because my mother was looking for a job at the time. She couldn’t find one, and my Social Security was about to run out since I turned eighteen, and my sister’s income was the only thing coming in, and it wasn’t enough.

As it turns out, Brett wasn’t able to keep his Social Security benefits, which was disappointing because he “thought [he] would actually be able to help out [his] family a lot more.” As any son would, he felt some obligation to help provide for his widowed mother. This is especially true in Brett’s case since he still holds himself responsible for the death of his father. After his first semester in college – a semester in which he passed only one of his four classes – Brett was

placed on probation, giving him one semester to improve his GPA before his financial aid benefits were revoked. Despite some improvement, those benefits were eventually revoked, and he found college a financial impossibility. By the time of our last formal interview, Brett was no longer enrolled in college, but it didn't seem to me as if he was disappointed.

During that last interview, Brett told me about life after college. He'd moved into a little apartment with his girlfriend of two years, who is an aspiring artist and shares Brett's love of graphic novels and anime. Like Brett, she works at Wal-Mart, and her recommendation may be the reason why Brett was able to find employment. Although college once seemed like a requisite step on the road to self-sufficiency, Brett doesn't seem to miss the stress and anxiety that college represented for him. In fact, he doesn't think much about the future at all. When I asked him what his plans were, he told me that he hoped to stay with his current girlfriend indefinitely, but "other than that, [he wasn't] sure." He also expressed some hope that her artistic career might take off and tried to show me some of her work on his cell phone. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to find the pictures he thought he'd saved. When I asked him about his original goal of becoming a computer programmer, he seemed surprised as if I'd reminded him of something he'd forgotten: "Yeah, I might still do that ... in a few years ... if it doesn't work out at Wal-Mart."

## **Conclusion**

I argued at the beginning of this chapter that Brett and Jacob both display some of the characteristic intellectual problems of rural anti-intellectual students despite the fact that they differ so markedly in personality and appearance. They both initially struggled because their limited experience consuming and creating texts suggested that all texts serve either an

informative or an entertaining function. They both also seem incapable at times of developing an argument – Jacob because his personal belief system relies on Biblical proofs that he knows are out of place in an academic setting, Brett because he is unable to articulate or defend a belief system of any sort. Finally, they both have acknowledged that they enrolled in college without a real sense that the experience would be transformative, that they would develop intellectually. Instead, their goals were pragmatic – financial, to be exact.

I left my final interview with Jacob convinced that he would return at some point to college, and that the experience would be more intellectually meaningful the second time around. It seemed to me as if he had become more open to new ideas and was interested in the kind of intellectual growth that a liberal arts education is designed to encourage. My final interview with Brett, however, was discouraging. He noted that he was much less stressed out since quitting school. When I asked him whether he would ever return, he told me that he might “sometime, when [he was] more ready.” It seemed to me, however, that he was simply placating me, that he was hoping to wrap up the interview – an interview which represented a final academic obligation after which he could simply close the door on his failed experience in college.

In the next, chapter of this study, I’ll suggest some strategies for reaching students like Jacob and Brett. I’ll do this in two sections. The first of these will be more philosophical as I’ll explore the points of intersection between rural and academic discourses, areas which an instructor might reasonably hope to build upon. I’ll also suggest some strategies for articulating the differences between the discourse community they’ve come from and the one into which they are being initiated. The second section, however, will be much more pragmatic as I present a sequence of essays and assignments that are designed to welcome students into the distinct and foreign culture of academia.

## Chapter Five – Pedagogical Suggestions

### Overview

Writing about the difficulties basic writers face when learning to adhere to the standards of academic discourse, Patricia Bizzell suggests that they might “find the comparative, deliberative stance of the academic world view” easier to accept than more socioeconomically privileged students because “the basic writers already know that their home communities’ standards are not the only ones possible – they learn this more immediately and forcefully when they come to college than do students whose home world views are closer to the academic” (“Basic Writers” 173). To a degree, this may be true, but it is a double-edged sword since Bizzell argues that “biculturalism is likely to be very difficult when the academic world view is one of the world views involved, because the academic seeks to subsume other world views to which the students may retain allegiance” (“Basic Writers” 171). Put simply, it seems to me that rural students from a homogenous and non-academic culture – frankly, a culture of anti-intellectualism – might more immediately recognize that their old ways of thinking, reading, and writing won’t do in college. But, they will also face more personal, emotional, and epistemological trauma since the academic worldview is a totalizing system that differs markedly from their own. Bizzell makes this same argument, acknowledging that basic writers will “find the stakes for accepting this world view higher than the stakes were for Perry’s students” since “basic writers have more to lose in modifying their earlier world views” (“Basic Writers” 173). The pronounced disparities between these views should make the existence of both views more obvious, but it will also make it significantly more difficult for basic writers from any cultural background to negotiate any sort of compromise. These difficulties are compounded by the faith

systems of many of the students I've been studying so that the "hegemonic power" Bizzell attributes to the academic worldview isn't the only thing students feel is at stake – their eternal destinies may seem to hang in the balance.

With so much at stake, it is no wonder that the composition classroom represents a real crisis for many of the students I've studied. It strikes me that the strategies they've developed for coping with this crisis – most notably avoidance and disengagement – are perfectly natural. In fact, I've come to see those students who reject avoidance and choose to grapple with these difficulties, seeking some kind of reconciliation or philosophical consistency, as heroic. Perry must have had something like this in mind when he linked cognitive and *ethical* development in his scheme. This is not an easy thing we're asking of them, and the inherent difficulty of the enterprise is compounded by instruction that presupposes the conventions of academic discourse rather than articulating and defending its primary tenets.

In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which I've tried to articulate these tenets while also establishing some common ground or points of intersection between rural students' discourse community of origin and the academic discourse community. In doing this, I am relying on my understanding that learning is inherently sequential and will be most effectively promoted by a system which seeks to build upon the learning that students already possess. It must also be promoted through a spirit of patience, gentleness, and mutual respect – as should all intercultural interactions. In the second section of the chapter, I will try to put some meat on these bones by delineating in some detail a sequenced strategy for accomplishing the goal of introducing rural students to the conventions of academic discourse. This sequence gradually evolved over a three-year period as I experimented with different assignments that might assist students in writing argumentative research essays. In the year of this study, I

adapted the sequence specifically to address the needs of the rural students I was studying. Before explaining and defending the sequence I should briefly address two possible objections.

### **A Note on “Research Papers”**

Before moving on, I should acknowledge that the goal of helping students to write argumentative research essays is not without controversy. Robert Davis and Mark Shadle’s “‘Building a Mystery’: Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking” notes that research writing is alive and well since it is “central to modern academic discourse” and “still taught in most composition curriculums” (417). Despite its prevalence, Davis and Shadle argue that research writing is “notoriously clichéd, and templated.” Similarly, they cite Richard Larson’s “The ‘Research Paper’ in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing,” which argues that the term “research writing” signifies very little since all academic writing is (or should be) informed by research. Developing their argument that the “modernist research paper” is a historical artifact that has fossilized, Davis and Shadle note that Steven Posusta has written a guide to quickly and efficiently generating the sort of thing that instructors seem to be looking for, *Don’t Panic: The Procrastinator’s Guide to Writing an Effective Term Paper (You know who you are)*. Davis and Shadle are particularly appalled by a system of templates that Posusta calls the “Instant Thesis Maker.” In describing Posusta’s book, they note that the “research paper has become a stationary target” (419). Additionally, they argue that the research paper is a purely “academic document” with little application outside of academia (420). Ironically, given the purposes of the project I’ve undertaken, these arguments against the traditional form can be seen as convincing arguments for its use.



Let me explain: If, as Davis and Shadle argue, the research paper is the foundational document of academic discourse, then it is an absolutely vital part of the acculturation that rural students need. Similarly, the formulaic nature of the document suggests it ought to be teachable. After all, as Davis and Shadle note, Posusta has made a career out of “help[ing] students quickly get up to speed” (419). It seems to me that many of the arguments against the research paper fall flat if you understand your students to be overwhelmed and confused rather than jaded and manipulative. Davis and Shadle seem to be aware of this since they argue that the traditional rules and structures dictated by academic discourse can affect different students very differently:

Some students seem to experience the culture of expertise as Kafka’s land surveyor does the castle – as impenetrable, governed either by inexplicable whims or rules that defy surveying. Those students who learn the rules, however, often suffer another dilemma – an apparent unwillingness or inability to think imaginatively or originally. (425).

Despite the fact that I disagree with many of their arguments against research writing – at least in the specific instance of rural basic writers – Davis and Shadle convincingly demonstrate that research writing has failed in its historical purpose:

The history of research writing in the American University is one of failed promise for students, teachers, and discourse. Begun with the egalitarian ideal of making knowledge, modern research writing has become the fallen “research paper,” an apprentice work piecing together what is known, and presenting this piecing in a form that is also known, at least by the teacher. (425)

In an attempt to salvage the knowledge-creating function of research writing, they propose four alternatives: the research argument, the personal research paper, the research essay, and the multi-genre/media/disciplinary/cultural research project. The first of these alternatives, the

research argument, is closest to what I hope to promote through the curriculum I am proposing since it has the capability to “shift the emphasis of the paper from the information presented to the significance of the information, and even the authorial self projected on the page” (427). My hope, then, is to teach students the conventions of academic discourse (“templated” as they may be) through the medium of an argumentative research paper that creates significant knowledge – knowledge that has some real-world application.

### **A Note on Writing in the Disciplines**

In suggesting a single strategy for the rapid acculturation of these students, I am glossing over the very real fact that there is no such thing as a single, consistent mode of academic discourse. Each academic discipline can be understood as representing a distinct culture and accompanying discourse community since each discipline holds itself to differing standards when it comes to the formulation and presentation of new truths. As many scholars have pointed out, it makes a certain kind of sense for undergraduates to be trained in the specific modes of knowledge and presentation native to their chosen discipline. This acknowledgement has led to the Writing Across the Curriculum movement and several offshoots including Charles Bazerman’s “Writing in the Disciplines.”

A great deal of scholarly writing has focused on proposals for re-configuring composition courses so that they introduce students to the specific conventions of writing in the discipline of their declared major. In most of this scholarship, the same underlying problems are addressed: the historic division of academic disciplines can seem inviolable, and many faculty members from other disciplines view writing as a discrete skill that should be taught by the English

department. Michael Carter suggests that this view originates in these faculty members' own educational experiences:

[B]ecause professors typically learn to write in their disciplines not by any direct instruction but by a process of slow acculturation through various apprenticeship discourses, they are unable to see that writing itself is specific to the discipline. (385)

This shortsightedness presents a real political problem since faculty members from other disciplines may resent the suggestion that they should be teaching biology *and* writing, or sociology *and* writing. An additional problem is that any attempt to customize the writing instruction incoming students receive so that they are introduced to the specific conventions of their chosen discipline can create a logistical nightmare. What happens, for example, when students suddenly decide to change majors?

Carter has proposed a solution to both of these problems in "Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing in the Disciplines." He argues that the epistemic value of writing – that is the ability of writing to create knowledge – can help faculty members in other departments to see the importance of writing as "procedural knowledge, writing as a way of knowing in a discipline" (387). This argument suggests the significance of the word "doing" in his title since an epistemic understanding of writing establishes its link to the knowledge-creating practices of other disciplines: "Writing may be understood as metadoing; particular kinds of writing are ways of doing that instantiate particular kinds of doing by giving shape to particular ways of knowing in the disciplines" (389). Carter divides these writing/doing tasks into four "metagenres" that are representative of four "metadisciplines" (394-407). In identifying four basic means by which academic disciplines construct knowledge, (and their concomitant written forms) Carter ultimately suggests that traditional divisions between disciplines may be better

seen as “porous and in flux” (410). More significantly for the purposes of my argument, he implies that the process of acculturation to discipline-specific discourses can be simplified by the recognition and articulation of similar ways of writing and doing between disciplines.

In a sense, my proposal can be seen as an extension of Carter’s argument since he argues that we can find common ground between some academic disciplines, and I am suggesting we should focus instruction for basic writers on the similarities between all academic disciplines. In doing so, I am not arguing that real differences – both rhetorical and epistemological – don’t exist between academic disciplines. Instead, I am simply arguing that those differences are both less numerous and less significant than they sometimes seem. It is a matter of vantage point. From the perspective of the English department, the Biology department seems a very foreign place indeed. To an incoming freshman, however, the similarities between the two departments are likely to make a greater impression than the differences.

That’s why the transition between a student’s native discourse community and the general academic community can be significantly more profound and challenging than the same student’s transition between writing in the humanities and writing in the sciences. The understanding that knowledge is inherently contextualized is difficult to acquire. Similarly, a vision of the writer’s role as knowledge-creator can elude students. Once these understandings have been acquired, however, it should be simpler for a student to adapt to the rhetorical context presented by each assignment in each new course.

I should note that I’m extending this argument conditionally. I believe it to be true of these students, from this culture, at this point in their academic careers. Since teaching should always be a process of adaptation and accommodation, different students in different circumstances would, of course, require a different approach.

## Intersections

In the introduction to *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, Gerald Graff claims that “argument literacy, the ability to listen, summarize, and respond, is rightly viewed as being central to being educated” (3). Thus far, I think very few readers will disagree. After all, we work in an educational culture that is marked by periodic but consistent calls for reform and a greater emphasis on “critical thinking skills.” (Although the term “critical thinking” is frequently bandied about for political purposes so that it has lost a great deal of its ability to suggest any specific thing, I think we can agree that it certainly includes the ability to comprehend and develop arguments.) In this way, Graff suggests that argumentation and critical reading skills are central to the project of a liberal arts education. His argument becomes more controversial, however, because he maintains that academic culture consistently makes these perfectly reasonable goals “look more opaque, narrowly specialized, and beyond normal learning capacities than they are or need to be” (1). That is, we are hiding the central tenet of academic culture – that the truth will best be reached through a process of detailed, ethical, source-driven argumentation – in “plain view amidst a vast disconnected clutter of subjects, disciplines, and courses” (3). As I will suggest in this chapter, I believe that part of the solution to this problem is the repeated and clear articulation of the principles of academic discourse. We need to reach a point with each class where students understand why and how we write in the ways that we do.

I will also argue – and here I am following Graff more closely – that we should begin by identifying points of intersection, helping students to see that they are already engaged in the everyday business of argumentation and that they have already developed a number of useful strategies towards that end. Beverly J. Moss does something similar for members of African-American churches. The final chapter of her *A Community Text Arises* argues that students can

build upon the literacy traditions of their home culture by identifying some common strategies of both their primary and secondary discourse communities. The remainder of this section will discuss three of those pre-existing strategies – or, points of intersection – that are common among rural students.

In the second chapter of this work (and, to a lesser degree, in chapters three and four, which focused on individual students) I have argued that the culture of the rural South is saturated with Evangelical Fundamentalism. Further, I have suggested that this fundamentalism leads to a dualistic approach to reading that is incompatible with the expectations of the writing classroom. Despite those criticisms, the prevalence of fundamentalist culture in the South does give students a “leg up” in at least one respect since they have been culturally conditioned to build source-driven arguments. That is, they have learned to base their belief system on a detailed and careful reading of a primary text, the Bible. Since it is characteristic of fundamentalists to base their entire theology on Biblical support, students have extensive and valuable experience when it comes to building arguments around that particular source.

Acknowledging this strength may seem to contradict my earlier point since I spent a great deal of time arguing that this training leads to problems when students read multi-voiced or satirical texts. Similarly, they often seem confounded when experts on a given subject disagree. After all, they’ve been trained to accept their source texts as literal holy writ. It is important to see, however, that these problems mask a real strength – although they may apply an inappropriate reading strategy, they are typically very comfortable with the mechanics of building an argument from a source. When a student expresses a belief and defends that belief by quoting the Bible, we should have mixed feelings. On the one hand, the student will have to learn to evaluate the rhetorical situation carefully and to choose a source-text that is suited to the

needs of his or her reader. On the other hand, there is something genuinely impressive about their ability to memorize and absorb scripture and to apply it in a specific written context.

Suggesting to a student that scriptural support may not bear much rhetorical weight can be a delicate operation, but I think it will always go better if we begin by acknowledging the student's ability to incorporate a written text while furthering an argument.

It is important to clarify what I mean by these students' ability to "incorporate sources." I don't mean to suggest that they are familiar with the guidelines of MLA citation or that they can gracefully incorporate quotations into their text. Instead, I'm suggesting that they have learned a more important lesson – arguments need proof, and this proof can be found by carefully reading selected sources. This understanding, culturally inculcated and strengthened by formal religious training, seems much more valuable to me than the relatively mundane skills of correctly citing sources or punctuating quotations.

The second point of intersection between the native discourse community of these rural students and the academic discourse community is closely related to the first in that it is also a result of these students' religious training. I have found that they have a remarkable ability for close reading. This should not be a surprise since many of the tenets of close reading can be shown to have their roots in the exegetical practices of religious scholars. In fact, the new critic's determination that a text be seen as autonomous – that is, viewed without the lens of a historical or cultural context – is not far from Martin Luther's famous call for "*Sola Scriptura*," a theological position that argues solely from scriptural authority without relying on Church tradition or secondary scholarship. For all these reasons, I have found that the students in my study have the ability to give a text careful sentence-level attention.

Michael Warner, who is uniquely positioned to comment on fundamentalist cultures since he was “a teenage Pentecostalist” and is now “a queer atheist intellectual,” (215) points to the existence of both of these literacy skills in the communities of his childhood:

In that world, the sub-denomination you belong to is bound for heaven; the one down the road is bound for hell. You need arguments to show why. And in that profoundly hermeneutic culture, your arguments have to be *readings*; ways of showing how the church down the road misreads a key text. Where I come from, people lose sleep over the meanings of certain Greek and Hebrew words (216-17).

In this passage, Warner points out the hermeneutical foundation of fundamentalist culture, but he also suggests the motivation underlying this level of textual attention. The stakes are simply much higher since these are matters of “not just life and death, but eternal life and death” (217). With their eternal destiny in the balance, it is no wonder that fundamentalist students read very closely.

It may seem a little old-fashioned to list “close reading” as a valuable asset for rural students since close reading and New Criticism have fallen out of favor in academic circles since the post-Cold War rise of so many competing strategies that more fully account for the cultural import of literature and the philosophical complexities inevitably incurred in the interpretive process. This is all well-travelled ground at this point since the debates over the ahistoricism and supposed objectivity of New Criticism flared in the 1970s, but it is important to acknowledge that the application of any critical interpretive theory presupposes the ability to approach a text carefully, systematically, and thoroughly. In that respect, I think we can see close reading as a valuable and necessary first step for basic writers. In time, their interpretive strategies may become increasingly sophisticated and contextualized, but the application of these new strategies



will rest on the ability to perform a close reading. For now, their ability to read and understand a text may be diminished by their confusion about the purposes of academic writing, but we can still praise them for working carefully and systematically through their reading. It's something on which to build. In this way, the development of individual students can be seen as mimicking the development of the entire field of literary criticism. In both instances, it is necessary to acquire a terminology and develop certain techniques before adopting a methodological orientation.

I have described two strengths of rural students, and both have been connected to these students' characteristic roots in the deeply religious culture of the American South. The third point of intersection I will discuss may be more universally applicable to anti-intellectualists from any region since it is a reflection of the academic pragmatism that marks all such students. This pragmatism is a real handicap when students fail to engage with course material that doesn't seem related to their financial goals, but it can also be a strength if instructors rise to the challenge of defending their pedagogical choices to students. As I've shown, the data accumulated by our colleagues in Business departments is very clear – employers want to hire graduates with critical literacy skills. If we can make this expectation on the part of employers explicit to these students, their pragmatism will cause them to focus on critical literacy skills in the way that they are currently focused on discrete bits of knowledge. With that in mind, I have consistently assigned reading in my classes that makes exactly this case. It's not difficult to find accessible scholarship that argues for the development of critical literacy skills – even for students in technical degree programs.

On a smaller scale, I have found that one additional positive effect of their academic pragmatism is that their writing tends to be focused on real-world problems. They instinctively

reject any reading that seems too high-minded or fails to connect its thesis clearly to the everyday lives of average Americans. With this in mind, I have begun demanding that students answer the “So what?” question. That is, I hold them to the standard of writing arguments that have some relevance to the lives of their readership. If they submit an argumentative essay that fails to include a call to action or some sense of how readers should be changed or influenced by reading the piece, I simply tell the students, “You’ve convinced me of your thesis. So what? How should I live my life differently as a result?” This strategy appeals to their sense of pragmatism, forcing them to see that arguments have a real and valuable function in our culture.

It might seem that Brett and Jacob’s “encyclopedia” essays undermine my point here since they clearly didn’t answer the “So what?” question, and they appear to lack any sense of the pragmatic value an essay may hold. They were written without any real sense of purpose. I believe, however, that these fact-driven and poorly developed reports are symptoms of Brett and Jacob’s larger problem – the problem being that they don’t understand how an argument can have any real-world value. Once the power of rhetoric, the power of argument, is made clear to rural students, they can begin to distinguish between argumentative essays that lack purpose and those that have some practical value. In this way, their academic pragmatism – their sense that a lot of what they’re reading is a waste of time – can become a strength. To develop this sense, I consistently challenge them not to waste their readers’ time, to build arguments and essays that will prove useful. In this way, I hope to connect their pragmatism to their academic writing so that they develop an understanding of their own rhetorical power, the power to change and improve their readers’ lives.

## Collaboration

I will argue that students' sense of rhetorical power is fostered by a pedagogical approach that focuses on collaboration. Before making that argument, however, I should specify exactly what I mean by the term "collaboration" since it can suggest a number of different approaches. For example, Andrea Lunsford has argued in "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center" that collaborative writing is the norm in many workplaces, and collaborative pedagogy can helpfully prepare students for the kinds of writing tasks they will encounter in their future professions. Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*, on the other hand, links collaborative classrooms to his goal of promoting expressivist writing. Therefore, he encourages students to avoid teacherly responses in peer workshops, encouraging them instead to play the "believing game" and express the feelings elicited by their classmate's writing (147-191). A third trend has been to emphasize the democratizing effect of collaboration since, as Ann Hill Duin notes, group work can reduce students' competitive urges and diminish the effects of the student-teacher hierarchy. Given the various purposes to which collaborative pedagogy has been employed, it seems important to distinguish the goals of the collaboration that I'm suggesting. Like all the elements of my pedagogical model, collaboration should serve the purpose of introducing students to academic discourse. Given this agenda, I have chosen to follow in the footsteps of those scholars who have advocated an epistemic approach to collaboration.

As we've seen, rural students often adhere to a more dualistic model of truth in which knowledge – typically derived from an authority figure or an authoritative text – is seen as absolute. One of the key differences between rural discourse and academic discourse, then, is that academic discourse presupposes that knowledge is a rhetorical construct and is created within communities of thinkers who agree upon certain truths and truth-making systems. In this

vein, Kenneth Bruffee draws on the work of Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty to argue that infants initially learn to think through conversation and that ultimately all knowledge can be seen as conversationally constructed and maintained “among a community of knowledgeable peers” (646). For Bruffee, this principle suggests the benefits of a more collaborative model for classroom instruction since that model “provides a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation valued by college teachers” (642). In other words, one way we can introduce students to the idea of socially-constructed knowledge is by fostering a classroom environment that promotes shared knowledge. This, then, is the goal of the collaboration I’m suggesting. Like all the elements of my pedagogical model, collaboration should serve the purpose of introducing students to academic discourse.

Taking this principle of socially-constructed knowledge as a starting point, co-authors James Reither and Douglas Vipond argue in “Writing as Collaboration” that “little substantive change in either course design or classroom practice has come about that can be said to result directly from this reconsideration of the nature of writing” (855). This is partly because “practical applications” of collaborative learning have “ordinarily been introduced into classrooms as overlays on courses [that are] still otherwise governed by traditional preoccupations” (855). Additionally, the lack of consensus among theories of social writing and the lack of research “about what people do when they write or about what students might do to learn to write” has left most writing teachers bewildered (856). Addressing these problems, the authors present three aspects of writing collaboration and some suggestions about how these might be realized in a completely redesigned course. These three aspects of collaborative writing include “co-authoring,” “workshopping,” and “knowledge-making” (857). In their piece, Reither and Vipond illustrate these three aspects by studying the collaborative writing process of

Russell A. Hunt and Vipond as they co-created “Evaluations in Literary Reading,” an interdisciplinary study arguing that literary reading can be productively compared “to the way people listen to stories in conversation” (Reither and Vipond 857).

A brief explanation of what Reither and Vipond meant by each of these three aspects of collaborative writing will prove useful since it can be difficult to translate these concepts into classroom policies and assignments. Describing the co-authoring process of Hunt and Vipond, they note that the two shared a word processor, “each occasionally even grabbing the keyboard out of the other’s hands” (858). To create the kind of “community within a community” that is necessary for a productive workshopping experience, the authors “asked trusted colleagues to comment on drafts of the article, and used this feedback to guide revisions of the piece” (858). Finally, the process of collaborative knowledge-making in this instance involved situating their argument within the ongoing discourses of several academic disciplines and attempting “to make their own contribution to knowledge-already-existing” (860). These three aspects of collaboration were especially useful to me as I developed a course designed to introduce rural students to academic discourse.

I do, however, draw the line at co-authored student work. Since some theorists have argued that all writing is innately collaborative, I should be very clear here: My students share their research, discuss ideas, debate, and review each other’s writing. Ultimately, however, the words on a given student’s page were placed there by its sole author. My decision to avoid co-authored pieces was informed in part by Sue Hum Yin’s “Collaboration: Proceed with Caution,” which argues that students are often ill-prepared for collaborative writing since the American educational system has historically focused on individual effort. In addition to the concerns that Yin raises, I felt that collaboratively written assignments wouldn’t prepare students as well for

the kinds of writing they would do in other classes. Since the goal of the course is to familiarize each student with academic discourse, it seemed wise to me to focus on the individually-authored writing privileged by that discourse community.

In order to promote the three aspects of collaboration they have identified, Reither and Vipond recommend uniting all class members around a single topic:

In general, we organize a course by setting a question which we ask the students to answer by functioning as a research team whose task it is to divide the labor and carry out the research necessary to answer the question. [...] This organization sets a situation that encourages the students in our writing and content-area courses to establish – through authoring, coauthoring, and workshopping – immediate, local communities of writer-knowers” (862).

In this way, students can interact collectively with an academic discipline, forming a “community-within-a-community,” and adding to the scholarly body of knowledge. The role of the instructor, then, is that of an “expert co-researcher,” who “models the process” of academic inquiry (863).

Writing elsewhere, Reither suggests another benefit of this “community-within-a-community.” In “Writing and Knowing: Towards Redefining the Writing Process,” he argues that our assignments – motivated by an epistemic understanding of writing – frequently assume that students can “prob[e] the contents of the memory and the mind” to develop their writing. For Reither, “This model of what happens when people write does not include, at least not centrally, any substantive coming to know beyond that which occurs as writers probe their own present experience and knowledge” (622). Instead, it assumes that student writers will find most of the resources that they need to frame an argument within themselves. Since this is patently

false, we must create courses that encourage students to develop a knowledge base early in the process. Citing the work of Russell Hunt, Reither argues that this course ought to be “organized as a collaborative investigation of a scholarly field rather than the delivery of a body of knowledge” (qtd. by Reither 625). Such a course “should image in important ways the ‘real world’ of active, workaday academic inquirers” (625).

There are multiple advantages to a collaborative writing classroom then. Students will have a better understanding of academic discourse when they experience firsthand (and imitate) its knowledge-making conventions. Similarly, students will find it easier to understand how academic culture views knowledge as socially or rhetorically-constructed when they have been part of a group effort to create such knowledge. Finally, students will find it easier to develop arguments when they are a member of a “community-within-a-community,” working with and against their classmates’ ideas and situating each argument within the broader conversation of the discipline they are investigating.

In the experimental semester I am describing, I attempt to foster this collaboration in a number of ways. Most significantly, as I’ve already mentioned, I require all students to focus on the same research topic for the duration of the semester. In this way, I ensure that each student will have access to the “knowledgeable peers” that Bruffee stresses. By the middle of the semester, each student will have been repeatedly required to read about the same topic, so that the students have a common pool of information from which to create their knowledge. Additionally, I have scheduled peer workshops for each of the six essays in this sequence. Typically, I begin these workshops more prescriptively by distributing worksheets so that students are provided with a structure for helpfully commenting on the work of their peers. My goal, however, is to wean students away from these worksheets as they become increasingly able

to comment helpfully on their own. By the end of the semester, the “conversation” that Bruffee calls for is a literal conversation with groups of students knowledgeably debating each other’s arguments.

## **Topics**

In addition to promoting this vital conversation, there are some practical advantages to focusing all of the assignments on a single topic. Chief among these advantages is that students are able to do a much more comprehensive job of researching a given topic when they are allowed – even encouraged – to pool their efforts. As every student contributes to the growing pile of research, the class is correspondingly enriched. I know that the process has succeeded when I overhear a student in the workshop recommending a source to another student. Another advantage is that focusing on a single topic allows students to “bounce” ideas off each other since they are all familiar – to one degree or another – with the subject matter of the essays their classmates are writing. As I will explain in my discussion of essay four, I encourage and facilitate this kind of sharing. Finally, a collective topic has the advantage of giving students a real and knowledgeable audience. Too often, composition courses give students the kind of assignments that require them to imagine a readership for their work. Focusing on a single shared topic for the entire semester and requiring students to read and respond to each other’s writing helps them to have a real sense of how much prior knowledge of the topic they can assume and what sorts of proofs might be most effective.

The danger to this approach, however, is that a poorly chosen topic can doom the entire semester since many of the assignments are cumulative. When each assignment builds upon the work students previously committed, changing course midstream can prove very difficult. With



that in mind, let me offer two criteria for choosing a topic: First, the topic should be one with which students aren't likely to be very familiar. When students are presented with a topic about which they've already come to a conclusion, they are often unable to approach the research process wholeheartedly. Additionally, their opinion on the topic may be founded on proofs which won't pass muster in an academic context. For example, if students are allowed to research capital punishment, they are likely to approach the topic with their minds made up. Their previously established opinions can shortchange the inquiry process since they are likely to proof-text rather than explore. They might also struggle since they are likely to have formed an opinion based on the convictions of an authority figure – a parent, teacher, or pastor. For both of these reasons, choosing a topic with which students already have some familiarity creates serious problems. This is also the reason why I don't allow students to choose their own topic since, given the choice, they will likely choose a topic with which they are dangerously familiar.

Secondly, it is important to choose a topic which is both broad and personally relevant to each student. While conducting this study, I focused two consecutive semesters of composition on anti-intellectualism, a topic that meets this criterion since it reflects historical trends in American culture while being particularly apropos for the students in my classes. In a previous semester, I asked students to research different strategies for grading writing, and this topic also was very successful since any discussion of grading techniques requires an involved discussion of what constitutes good writing and the dynamics of student/teacher relationships. The discussion was suitably wide-ranging, but students also felt some personal ownership in the topic since, by the time they reach a freshman composition course, they have been graded in a variety of different ways. I was also able to help students engage directly in the research process by applying a variety of different grading strategies to their work so that when I used a rubric to

grade their third essay, they were able to judge its effectiveness and make helpful suggestions for improving the rubric.

### **Pedagogical Objectives**

It is my goal in this second half of the chapter to provide readers with a complete sequence of assignments that addresses the unique problems faced by rural students and seeks to rapidly and respectfully introduce them to the academic discourse community. I also hope to defend each pedagogical choice so that readers will have a sense of why I've structured the semester as I have<sup>31</sup>. With that reasoning in mind, they should be able to adapt this sequence as necessary to meet the demands of their own students. Before a discussion of each essay in the sequence, it is important to establish the pedagogical priorities I had in mind when they were created. These priorities are directly related to the problems I've explored in this project. Students struggle to adjust to the demands of academic discourse when it comes to reading, thinking, and writing, and I will begin by addressing each of these problem areas and suggesting some strategies for helping students to see these differences.

As I've shown, rural students typically struggle in their academic reading because they accept scholarly writing uncritically and view most other writing as having a purely entertaining function. In an effort to help them examine the truth claims of the scholarly writers they are reading in my class, I have relied on the time-tested strategy of "teaching the controversy," elaborated by Graff in *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts can Revitalize*

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<sup>31</sup> Since the presentation of assignments in this chapter is focused on defending my pedagogical choices by connecting each assignment to the needs of rural basic writers, readers may find they have specific, detailed questions about each assignment that are not answered in the text of this chapter. Appendix three should help to answer these questions as it consists of the student handouts I distribute for each of the six projects.

*American Education*. Graff argues that rather than pining for a mythical apolitical past, we should acknowledge the contextualized and politicized nature of our field and foreground academic controversies in our pedagogy. This strategy directly challenges the preconceptions of the rural students I've studied since it forces them to look at the ways in which experts in any given field consistently disagree.

Since I require my students to explore a single topic for the duration of the entire semester, approaching a broad subject from a variety of different perspectives, there is a sense in which I'm "teaching the controversy" throughout the semester. As students are assigned oppositional scholarly pieces addressing the same topic, they inevitably begin to position themselves in the debate. This process helps them to develop more nuanced theses for their argumentative essays, but it also helps them to see firsthand how academic knowledge is created and maintained. Similarly, I have used both the midterm and final exams as opportunities for the same sort of thing. Typically, I'll assign two oppositional articles for these exams and require a brief synthesis in response. I also devote a lecture to a fairly involved discussion of the dialectic process, helping students to see that academic knowledge is a rhetorical construct and "presuppose[s] an acceptance of human limits, including the limits of reason" (Perry 150).

As I have argued in previous chapters, the Perry scheme of cognitive development is problematic when used for sorting or categorizing students. There is little consensus about the possibility or desirability of speeding students through the stages Perry describes. The scheme does, however, provide a useful description of the kinds of thinking that are privileged in academic discourse. For that reason, I have made a point of focusing a single lecture near the beginning of the semester on the basic principles of the Perry scheme. In doing so, I have found it necessary to simplify the scheme, collapsing the nine categories into four broad positions:

duality, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. Doing this is an attempt to de-mystify the expectations of students' instructors – especially in fields other than writing. It has been my experience that instructors in other fields often have something like the Perry model in the back of their minds, but they may lack the terminology to make their epistemological expectations clear to students. The result is that the student receives a poor grade and neither the instructor nor the student can say exactly why. In these examples, a real opportunity for learning has been lost and students are often embittered by their sense that teachers' grades reflect their biases. There is a sense, of course, in which teachers' grades do reflect their biases, but we need to help students see that teachers are biased towards specific ways of knowing rather than biased towards certain conclusions. If a student can be shown that an argumentative essay on foreign policy received a poor grade because it didn't display the kind of thinking that is privileged in academic circles rather than because the teacher is a Democrat, we have accomplished something of value.

Finally, after addressing the approaches to reading and thinking that characterize academic discourse, I move towards a discussion of the kinds of argument that are valued in the classroom. My discussion of rhetoric is predicated on the assumption that the audience must always be the arbiter of proof. That is, if a writer's goal in any rhetorical instance is really to convince the audience, then it is the writer's obligation to develop proofs that will be meaningful to the audience. Two techniques have helped me to communicate this truth to students. First, I use a discussion of Toulmin argument to introduce the difficulties inherent in any ethical or philosophical debate. Using the concept of "warrants," I lead students to the understanding that ethical and philosophical debates are often counter-productive because the two sides of the debate make such different assumptions about fundamental philosophical issues that their proofs

typically have no weight – they are unwarranted. This discussion is of particular value for Christian students from a fundamentalist background since it can help them to see why any number of scripture quotations is unlikely to sway their readers. Putting it very bluntly, I’ve even told these students that they are welcome to quote the Bible in defense of their claim as long as they convert all their readers in the introduction.

Similarly, I’ve found that some discussion of the rhetorical strategies employed by the apostle Paul can be a useful way to help students from a fundamentalist background understand the necessity of developing arguments with their readers’ needs in mind. Specifically, a passage from the first epistle to the Corinthians makes a clear case for adapting arguments to the needs of the listeners:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. (*New Revised Standard Version I Cor. 9.19-23*)

Exploring the implications of this passage can be very freeing to students from a fundamentalist background because they often feel as if developing ascriptural rhetorical strategies is a betrayal of their own belief system. Here, an authority they accept suggests that it not a betrayal – in fact, it’s necessary. In this way, I offer a scriptural sanction to students who are uncomfortable

making an argument from secular sources. Other passages from Paul's writing are slightly less explicit, but make the same point. One such useful passage is in the seventeenth chapter of the book of Acts when Paul invokes the "unknown God" of ancient Athens. Again, students who feel that their faith would be compromised if they were to employ proofs other than the Bible should be able to see that Paul is willing to use whatever rhetorical tools are available.

With these priorities (critical reading, epistemological sophistication, and rhetorical awareness) in mind, I have created six essay assignments that serve to introduce students to the conventions of academic discourse.

## **Sequenced Essays**

### **The Review**

The first essay assignment in the six-essay sequence I am proposing is designed to provide an access point to academic thinking by employing a structure with which students are already familiar, the review. In our consumer-driven culture, students are likely to have read a great number of reviews. They read reviews in car magazines, computer game websites, and sites that archive cooking recipes. The website [epinions.com](http://epinions.com) even offers reviews of reviewers since consumers who review products are then reviewed in turn so that the site self-regulates while promoting detailed, thoughtful, and carefully organized reviews of all sorts of products and services. Suffice it to say that there is no formal structure which is more familiar to most students than the review. In addition to offering the advantage of familiarity, the review is also a useful introduction to academic thought since it requires students to develop criteria and then systematically evaluate the product or service they've chosen. In this way, it encourages students to develop a claim and support it with reasoned thinking. Additionally, it establishes the

evaluation as contextual since students are encouraged to see that differing readers might have differing criteria.

In order for the assignment to promote this sort of thinking, it must be carefully presented. For example, I don't allow students to do any secondary research when preparing their review. Instead, their reasoning must be supported by their own experience of the product. This stipulation is necessary since the review comes so early in the semester that we haven't yet had time to discuss research in any meaningful way, but it also offers another advantage in that it requires students to reason from their own life experience rather than simply stringing together a series of quotations chosen because they support the student's prior belief. I also ask that students present a nuanced conclusion. That is, they aren't allowed to suggest that a product or service is absolutely good or absolutely bad – my experience here suggests that this is difficult for them since opting for either extreme allows them to rely on hyperbole and snappy phrasing rather than careful, systematic thought. Insisting on a balanced and thoughtful tone is imperative, however, since careful, academic analysis and evaluation are exactly the skills being fostered.

### **The Comparison**

The second essay in my sequence requires many of the same cognitive skills as the first. Students are still evaluating products or services based on a number of carefully chosen criteria. In this second project, however, they will compare all of the similar options rather than focusing on one choice. This more involved project requires them to focus on organization since an essay which attempts to compare the ability of five different products to meet four or five criteria can easily become unmanageable. Our classroom discussions preparing them for this project focus

on different strategies for organizing the piece. I also introduce Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say; I Say* at this point since its focus on metacommentary helps beginning writers to guide their readers through the essay. When doing this, I encourage students to borrow liberally from the book's list of templates, using these prepackaged phrases as "signposts" for their readers.

### **The Summary**

Students typically chafe when I devote an entire project to the skill of summary since the assignment seems to them to preclude creativity. However, I have found it to be enormously beneficial. In my experience, summarization might be the most under-taught academic skill, but the examination of any piece of serious scholarship will illustrate how vital it is to successful academic writing. Mastering the art of summary allows students to position themselves in an argument while also directly promoting critical reading skills. Eventually, they should begin to see that summarization does require a sort of creativity, and is a necessary skill for the academic writer. Additionally, this assignment foregrounds the connections between reading and writing since students are forced to identify the essay's main points, minor points, evidence, etc. In this way, I hope to draw their attention to the rhetorical patterns of academic discourse.

When choosing an article that students will summarize, I have selected lengthy scholarly articles that further our discussion of the semester's research topic. Since the goal of the assignment is to promote critical reading skills, I see no advantage to searching for an easier or shorter text. This text is also chosen because it furthers our understanding of the semester's research topic. Although I introduce the topic at the beginning of the semester and it is the focus of many classroom discussions, this third assignment marks the first time that students will write about the topic they've been discussing, so the text must be chosen carefully. While preparing



for the assignment, I tell students repeatedly that this assignment might take less time to write than some others, but they will find that the reading they're expected to do will be very difficult. At times, I've found it helpful to guide them through some of this reading, modeling an academic approach to reading while helping them to decipher the complexities of the article's argument.

I have found that comparing academic argument to creating a collage helps students to understand the place of summarization in academic writing. When they see that a different sort of creativity is called for— their argument will be creative, but it will often be creative in that it finds new uses for previously existing ideas — they begin to understand how necessary the ability to shape and resize ideas is. Extending the collage metaphor, I have compared the skill of summarization to digital photography since the ability to crop and resize ideas is as necessary to argumentation as cropping and resizing photos must be to a collage-artist. With that resizing idea in mind, I've created an assignment that asks student to summarize an academic article three times, creating a one-sentence summary, a one-paragraph summary, and a one-page summary. Although I don't place much emphasis on page lengths for the other projects, offering "page suggestions" instead, I do emphasize to students that accurately resizing an argument is the skill being developed with this assignment, so I expect them to adhere closely to the sizes suggested by the assignment guidelines. When grading the assignment, I focus on students' ability to summarize accurately and objectively. Ultimately, I hope that students begin to see that this process of gradual distillation, determining what to include and what to leave out at each stage, is a necessarily creative one. Student have encouraged me in this regard since they often note that two summaries of the same article might differ — despite both being accurate — as they reflect the rhetorical purposes of the summarizer.

### **The Summary of a Controversy**

My fourth assignment follows so closely on the third that I encourage students to incorporate some of the text of their third project into the fourth. The emphasis in this fourth project is on research instead of reading, however, since students are asked to summarize the larger controversy by assembling and organizing a series of smaller summaries that focus on individual texts. I present this assignment by arguing that students haven't earned the right to an opinion of their own until they demonstrate that they are familiar with all the opinions surrounding the topic we're studying.

Since this assignment is predicated on a more comprehensive approach to research than most students are used to, I encourage students to pool their efforts. As we lead up to the creation of the fourth major project, I assign a series of mini-summaries. To begin this process, I ask students to identify all of the major subtopics related to the topic we're studying. When studying anti-intellectualism, students often identified sub-topics like education, evangelicalism, politics, media, and poverty. Taking these sub-topics one at a time, I ask each student to find a different article related to the sub-topic. So, for example, they might set out to find an article that addresses anti-intellectualism and politics. After finding a suitable article, students develop a one-paragraph summary along with a citation. Using this strategy, the class is able to assemble approximately twenty mini-summaries focused on the same sub-topic. By the time we've completed four or five rounds of this exercise, I've received an impressive body of research, which I then distribute back to the students. In the past, I've printed off a stack of mini-summaries for each student in the class, but the last time I employed this technique I simply

uploaded all the mini-summaries to the class' website, saving paper and hopefully making the material more accessible to the class.

This is obviously a lengthy process – although it shouldn't take more than two or three weeks – but it leaves students unusually well-prepared to approach the summary of a controversy. By the time they sit down to organize their thoughts, they are extremely knowledgeable about the topic I've assigned, and their essays reflect that knowledge. Rather than repeating that tired question teachers dread, "How many sources do I have to have?" they are more likely to ask how to limit or organize the piece so that it accurately reflects the field of knowledge without being oversized or unwieldy. At this point, I often find that students who have struggled to engage with research topics in the past are chomping at the bit, eager to develop their own ideas and anxious to write thesis statements for the fifth essay.

### **The Argumentative Essay**

There is a palpable sense of relief in my classroom when I introduce the fifth project – finally, the students have earned their stripes, and are free to begin developing their own ideas about the topic that we've spent months discussing and researching. It's a nice moment in the class, and I play to it, comparing the research process which they've just completed to the process employed by working scholars. I also try to empower students at this point by suggesting that their combination of personal experience with the subject matter and exhaustive research should make them feel very confident. They are now experts, and they've earned the right to be heard. They've earned the right to argue.

By this point, when I suggest that they can't possibly hope to address the entire topic that we've been studying, they nod knowingly. After all, they know that there are thousands of pages

of writing devoted to the subject. Instead, I suggest that they need to select the bit of argument that most appeals to them and to begin developing a thesis. At this point, I'll remind them again of the "So what?" question, encouraging them to "slice off" a bit of the larger argument and suggest some real-world implications of their claim. I'll also suggest that they "recycle" sections of their fourth essay, using the opinions of others to position their own argument.

When I began to experiment with this sequence, I was partly motivated by the sense that we frequently ask the impossible of students. Although working scholars will often spend years developing and honing an argument, we typically give students just a few weeks to accomplish something that might differ in scope but is supposed to be similar in purpose. It just won't work. The result is that students are forced to write ill-informed essays while employing rhetorical strategies and sentence structures that are largely foreign to them. It's no wonder that they often subvert the intent of the assignment through hyperbolic ranting, the refusal to establish a claim, or even plagiarism. On some level they must know that they can't possibly succeed. Even if they receive an "A," it will be a relative grade – indicating excellent work for a student paper, but still a shabby caricature of real academic writing.

Although my system is not without flaws – students often complain that it's exhausting and tedious to write three essays in a row about the same topic – it does provide those students who stick it out with the opportunity to write something of real scholarly value. Often, students will submit their fifth project with a kind of glow about them. They know that they've produced work of a higher quality than before, and they sense that this process has been a kind of induction. I try to make it an occasion of celebration, and I tell them that they've achieved something significant. Assessing that significance is the focus of the sixth and final project.

## The Reflective Essay

The last essay in this sequence is an attempt on my part to foreground (again) the differences between the native discourses of my students and academic discourse. I hope also to cement the learning they've accomplished by asking them to write about what they've learned – specifically, to write a personal essay focused on what they've learned about academic discourse. They frequently note that the projects I've asked them to complete over the course of our semester were more difficult than they expected. The difficulty that they experienced, however, is usually moderated by the sense that expectations were very clear. As Graff has noted, the experience of many basic writers is marked by “bafflement – usually accompanied by shame and resentment,” (*Clueless* 1) so the fact that students understand the goals of each assignment seems a very positive sign to me. Additionally, students often express a sense that they have achieved something important by completing the course. One student echoed this sentiment when she wrote that “I feel like the course was good for me! Stressed the heck out of me at times, maybe added a few more white hairs to my head, but also left me feeling like I did accomplish something, I would not have chosen for myself.” In these reflective personal essays, students also consistently express their thanks because they feel well prepared for the writing and reading they will be doing in future courses. I make it a point to thank them as well. After all, I'm aware that my course asks a great deal of them, and its success is predicated on their effort, their contributions.

## **Conclusion**

The sequence of essays I have described here is the result of several years of experimentation, and it has proven to be an effective way of introducing rural students from the Missouri Ozarks to the demands of academic discourse. Emphasizing the argumentative research essay as the foundational document of academic discourse allows me to articulate the goals of academia and the knowledge-creating mechanisms by which they are accomplished. Similarly, the emphasis I place on collaboration allows students to mimic the writing processes of working scholars while simultaneously suggesting that knowledge is a social construct. By sequencing six major writing assignments and specifying the goals of each, I lead students gradually so that the skills required by academic discourse are acquired incrementally. Finally, I have suggested specific strategies that address the differences between rural and academic discourses.

## **Chapter Six – Conclusion**

### **Overview**

In the final chapter of this study, I have two purposes: First, I will call for more studies like this one – studies that address the needs of specific discourse communities and studies that acknowledge students’ unique cultural context. As I will argue, the appropriate person to conduct each of these studies is always a teacher. In a sense, this is the business of all teachers since the creation of curricula must begin with an understanding of where the students are. That is, it must begin with some understanding (often subconscious) of the primary discourse communities of our students. Good teachers acquire this sense slowly and cumulatively, customizing their instruction to the needs of both individual students and groups. Additionally, as I will show, a teacher is uniquely situated to undertake this exercise in an ethical manner. In the second section of this chapter, I will explore the ethical implications of this project, and, by extension, the ethical implications of any project of acculturation. Ultimately, I will suggest that these ethical problems can only be resolved by positioning our students as guests rather than strangers.

### **Further Research**

Bizzell concludes her essay “When Basic Writers Come to College” by arguing that we need more research about the ways in which basic writers “mediate between their home cultures and the academic culture as they move through their college educations” (172-173). In one sense this project has been an extended attempt to address that need. The attempt seemed necessary to

me for two reasons. First, it seems to me that students from this area have been under-researched. When I began to teach here, these students were wholly “other” to me, and it was difficult to find scholarly work that addressed their specific needs.

Second, I have studied these students simply because they are the students I teach. The sort of project I’ve undertaken here needs to be repeated for each student-group since our teaching must be informed by real knowledge of our students and their cultures of origin. The appropriate person to undertake this sort of study is always the person on the ground, the instructor who is daily immersed in the unique culture of his or her students. Instructors are uniquely positioned as participant-observers, and they have a vested interest in creating a fuller, richer understanding of their students’ primary discourses.

In addition to their pedagogical interest in these discourses, instructors should also feel some obligation to publish the results of these studies. This is especially important since the findings of isolated ethnographic projects can’t be presumed to hold true in other contexts. . Therefore, the ethnographic movement in composition research can only achieve its goals if it becomes a widespread phenomenon. Simply put, if we were to compare any two researcher’s findings, we would inevitably see that they are studying different “texts.” Even if they were to study the same group of people, they would be studying them at different times in different contexts, and the data collected would necessarily differ. Additionally, since the ethnographer’s interpretation of data is an inherently creative act, the process creates a kind of rhetorically situated truth that is rooted in context and cannot be transplanted. North points this out, arguing that the epistemological strength of ethnography, its knowledge-making power lies in “accumulation” rather than “consensus” (277-284).



For all these reasons, ethnographic research in composition must strive to be suggestive and evocative rather than definitive. North suggests that the inability of ethnographic research to create definitive truths can be discouraging, but if we fail to embrace this truth, we undermine the project itself:

From some perspectives – a positivist perspective in particular – this pattern of accumulation may seem a disheartening, not to say crippling, weakness in Ethnographic knowledge. And, indeed, not every member of composition’s loose-knit Ethnographic community seems willing to accept or recognize it. Nevertheless, it represents the logical outcome of the mode of inquiry’s premises; to deny or evade it is to deny or evade, as well, the kind of authority Ethnographic knowledge does have, and so to undermine the integrity of the inquiry as a whole. (284)

For North, the authority of ethnographic research “derives from its ability to keep one imaginative universe bumping into another” (284). By using the novel metaphor, “bumping into another,” he suggests the ability of ethnographic research like this study to produce a fuller, more holistic account of an intercultural exchange than any other research method. Citing Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretations of Cultures*, he argues that ethnographic research can “reduce the puzzlement – what manner of men are these? – to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise” (qtd. by North 278: 16). In that respect, I have found this project personally fulfilling since it has, to a degree, addressed many of my questions.

There is a very real sense, of course, in which we are all engaged in similar inquiries as we experiment with pedagogical strategies and wonder about our students’ lives. Very few of us, however, systematically develop these findings and publish the results. According to North this is partly because ethnographic research is “thick” and therefore not easily condensed to the

size of a journal article. It is also because the journals in our field are more likely to publish those studies which are “most amenable to Experimentalist standards” (313). Despite these practical difficulties, it is important that we begin developing and disseminating a body of similar studies since they offer the best hope for understanding and teaching the various student-groups that we serve.

Future researchers will, of necessity, develop their own strategies for acquiring and assessing student data since the irreplicable nature of this research means that “anything borrowed from the interpretation of one and applied to another must be the object of considerable skepticism” (North 281). In developing these new strategies, researchers must keep in mind the ethical problems I have raised throughout this study. In the next sections of this chapter, I will more fully develop those ethical problems before suggesting that they are best resolved by the instructor since the instructor controls the “contact zone” of cultural interaction.

### **Ethical Problems**

That term, “contact zone” is borrowed from the work of Mary Louise Pratt, who defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). Given this definition, it is clear that the composition classroom is a perfect example of a contact zone since, as we have seen, it is the sight of a great deal of cultural clashing. Additionally, of course, it represents a “highly asymmetrical” power structure.

The ethical problems presented by any project designed to acculturate students to academic discourse have been explored at some length in recent decades. Most famously, the Oakland Ebonics resolution of 1996 brought some of these issues to the attention of national

media outlets by foregrounding dialectical issues. However, this is only one of the more recent and more public evidences of this pervasive issue. Informed by the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and others, composition instructors are increasingly aware of the political nature of the educational enterprise. Similarly, recent efforts to promote multiculturalism in the composition classroom have sensitized writing teachers to the necessity of creating a multivoiced, culturally and racially integrated classroom. The combination of these factors has led to a growing sense that the process of acculturating students to academic discourse can reasonably be seen as an act of violence or misguided imperialism. Despite this critical hubbub, most composition classes still privilege academic discourse over the native discourses of their students.

A widely-employed response to the ethical dilemma presented by our privileging of academic discourse suggests that academic discourse is not only privileged in academia but also in many other realms. Given this understanding, we would be remiss if we failed to provide our students with access to the language and thinking-systems of political, social, and economic authority. Bizzell suggests another implication of this line of thinking by arguing that students' acquisition of academic discourse may play a role in helping to preserve their primary discourses:

It could be argued, however, that the home world view, especially if it is associated with a social group of relatively little power, has a better chance of surviving if some who hold allegiance to it are also sufficiently familiar with the academic world view to wield power in the larger society. They will be able to argue for the preservation of the language and culture of the home world view [...]" (Basic Writers 172)

Bizzell's ingenious argument here suggests that the solution to this political problem might be equally political. If the charge is that we marginalize certain discourse communities by forcing them to think, speak, and read on our terms, one sound counter-argument is that this marginalization might ultimately lead to the salvation of those same communities. Armed by their new-found rhetorical power, emigrants might choose to wield that power for the good of the communities that they have (to one degree or another) left behind. Put simply, if we are charged with disempowering groups of people, our defense has often been that in doing so we are empowering individual members of that group. (Whether they can remain members of that group after being inducted into our own is another matter that I will take up later in this chapter.) Following the theoretical trend of our time, the ethicality of any such project has usually been discussed in political terms.

I don't mean at all to discredit these efforts since I find myself sympathetic to the arguments of many of the scholars I've mentioned. I would like to suggest, however, that the theoretical and political nature of the controversy sometimes obscures the plight of individual students. Following the narrow focus of the rest of this study, I want to foreground that individual plight since the process of acculturation can represent a real loss for some rural students. In gaining a new community, they may forfeit the old. In this limited sense, then, I am still acknowledging the political implications of acculturation since, as feminists are fond of pointing out, the personal is always political.

To further complicate things, this process of acculturation – which they never signed up for – is a painful one. The work of Richard Rodriguez, which focuses on his increasing alienation from both family and culture of origin, suggests this sort of difficulty since Rodriguez clearly links his progressive estrangement from Chicano culture to his increasing engagement with

academic culture and discourse. Richard Miller writes about one class' response to Rodriguez' work, noting that they vilified Rodriguez for abandoning his family:

They [Miller's students] appear to articulate a desire about how schooling should function – that is, that schools should restrict themselves to providing “know-how” and that they should not disturb one's place in the world. And such responses suggest a fear that schools do not actually function in this isolated way, but rather produce (or reinforce) an estrangement from one's past. (22)

In this passage, Miller links anti-intellectualism (the desire for “know-how” is a tip-off) with a deep-seated fear that any genuinely transformative educational experience will leave students unable in some sense to return home. Afraid of voicing this fear, Miller's students “argue that being good at school need not change one in any substantial way” (23). The testimony of Rodriguez and others who have written about their experience of acculturation is clear, however: you can never go home.

Warner's description of his transformation from “teenage Pentecostalist” to “queer, atheist intellectual” is marked by a similar sense of loss since the faith he left behind “supplied [him] with experiences and ideas that [he is] still trying to match” (216). He also argues that the process of acculturation is one of constructing a new or adapted identity, noting that the desire to reimagine the self is a uniquely American one, reflected in all uniquely American religions:

We've invented an impressive array of religions: Mormon, Southern Baptist, Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostalist, Nation of Islam, Christian Science, Seventh-Day Adventist – every last one of them a conversion religion. They offer you a new and perpetual personality, and they tell you your current one was a mistake you made. They tell you to be somebody else. I say: believe them. (223-24)

The process of acculturation, then, inevitably involves some level of estrangement from the culture of origin. At the same time, it forces students to create new identities for themselves, to redefine themselves, in ways that are often painful. It is safe to assume that readers of this piece have undergone a similar (to a greater or lesser degree) process of personal redefinition, and their impulse might be to assume that my description of the trauma caused by acculturation is hyperbolic or overwrought – especially if their own experience was less traumatic. I can offer several reasons, however, why this process is unusually violent for the rural students I have studied.

Earlier, I noted that current trends in the field of composition acknowledge the political nature of what we do and correspondingly seek to welcome a variety of cultures and ethnicities. In our effort to create a classroom culture that respects students from all cultural backgrounds, however, we've often overlooked rural students. Kim Donhower suggests that rural students should be considered one of these disempowered groups since they have been negatively stereotyped in both academic and general culture for decades:

The field of composition has traditionally demonstrated a deep concern for ways to best serve students from groups who feel a sense of cultural displacement in university environments. Given the long history of stereotyping rural literacies, we must acknowledge that, especially in the literacy classroom, rural students are one of these consitutencies. (76).

The focus of this study has been the ways that students from the Ozarks mistrust the world of academia, but Donehower's work suggests that this mistrust goes the other way as well since academic stereotypes about rural places date back many decades and have been largely negative (37-76). One side effect of this mutual mistrust is that rural students who achieve some mastery

of academic discourse may find that their home communities begin to mistrust them. In this way, rural students are likely to experience a relatively higher level of alienation from their families and primary discourse communities.

In addition to being marginalized by academics and alienated from their home cultures, rural students may be angered by their misunderstandings of the goals of higher education. Throughout this piece I've argued that students from rural cultures aren't opposed to learning; they're opposed to intellectualism. Using Hofstadter's terminology, we could say that they value "intelligence" but not "intellect." That is, they value learning that is "narrow" and "unfailing practical," but they are opposed to the "critical, creative, and contemplative side of mind" (25). With those priorities in mind, they enroll in college hoping to improve their lot in life. After all, every message they've received – from high school counselors, the media, the White House, even our own advertisements – suggests that colleges exist so that students can secure higher wages. Faculty in English departments, however, tend to have very different goals in mind. Earlier in this study, I suggested that the disparity in the goals of students and teachers was a source of tension, and that suggestion is true, but it doesn't go far enough. To employ an obsolete rural idiom, we've sold them a "pig in a poke." That is, we advertise one thing, and then supply another. In return for their tuition, time, and effort, we've promised better-paying, more satisfying careers. They are justifiably angered when the actual payoff turns out to be a painful process that unsettles their belief system and distances them from their homes.

Finally, rural students who are also evangelical fundamentalists may feel that adopting a new, more critical world view means sacrificing their faith. As I've argued earlier in this piece, the power and prestige associated with mastery of academic discourse may be outweighed for these students by their fear that intellectualism and faith are fundamentally incompatible. This is

not an unfounded fear on their part since, as Shari Stenberg argues, “In academic culture, religious ideologies are often considered hindrances to – not vehicles for – critical thought” (271).

For all these reasons, rural students are likely to find the process of acculturation unusually traumatic. In the next section, I will suggest a means by which instructors may enter the “conflict zone” and achieve their pedagogical goals in an ethical manner.

### **Ethical Solutions**

A thoughtful reader with a broad enough perspective may have noticed that there is one obvious solution to all the problems I’ve presented here. I could quite easily avoid all these issues and spare my students this trauma by simply re-purposing my course. If I were, for example, to decide that rural students were best served by a writing course that focused on grammatical correctness and personal writing, my students would probably learn a thing or two about commas and generate pleasant essays about their memorable high school experiences and first loves. I’m quite confident no one would complain. Of course, this would present another ethical complication since I would then be hiding what I believed to be the truth. In a very real sense I would be “un-teaching” as I concealed my intellectual allegiances, and this approach is contrary to the academic world view I have adopted. In other words, my commitment to academic discourse standards requires me to witness to what I believe.

Bizzell argues that the “academic seeks to subsume other world views,” and she means this intra-personally (“Basic Writers” 171). That is, she means that students won’t normally be able to maintain allegiance to two conflicting discourse communities. It’s just as true inter-personally, however. The academic world view subsumes other world views by requiring



students to defend their opinions in the terms of academic debate. This defense – even when apparently successful – sows the seeds of critical thought. And, of course, the underlying tenet of academic discourse is that everything must be subjected to critical thought. In this way, any attempt to justify another world view using the structures and terminology of academic discourse is doomed. (Sometimes we lose track of this fact because academic discourse has traditionally prioritized tolerance. Prioritizing tolerance, however, isn't the same thing as tolerating other world views – especially when it comes to other world views that are inherently intolerant.)

I am teaching academic discourse, then, because it seems to me to be inevitable – once the critical question has been asked, it cannot be unasked. This inevitability is suggested by the ancient myth of Pandora's Box. As a reminder, Pandora opened a box containing all the evils of the world because her curiosity got the better of her.<sup>32</sup> If this were all there were to the story, it would seem to be a simple cautionary tale warning against the dangers of excessive curiosity – something along the order of the old aphorism “curiosity killed the cat.” There are two details, however, that often go overlooked and suggest a richer, deeper meaning. The first is that Zeus doesn't punish Pandora for her transgression since he knew that it would happen. Zeus' knowledge speaks to the inevitability of critical thought since it suggests that curiosity – that desire to look behind and inside, to test and question – is at the root of the human condition. The second often overlooked detail is that when all the evils of the world fled from the box, one thing was left behind – hope. This too tells us something of the human condition since opening the box is both the source of our discomfort and the source of our hope.

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<sup>32</sup> I'm aware that in retelling this story I am glossing over a number of difficulties including the misogynistic implications of Zeus' decision to punish men by giving them a woman. However, I'm arguing that the story has entered our cultural consciousness because it creates a mythical sort of truth – that is, it tells us something true about ourselves.

If, as it seems to me, we cannot escape our obligation to acculturate students, helping them to develop a more academic (and thus more critical) world view, it remains to us to determine the most ethical way to go about it. In his exploration of ethics in composition, Gary Olson notes that “we must come to terms with the truly colonizing effects of the pedagogical scenario” (94). Developing his argument by tracing ethical themes in the post-colonial work of Spivak, Bhabha, and JanMohamed, he suggests that “the most useful way of conceiving ethics is in the terms that several postmodern thinkers do: *ethics is the encounter with the Other*” (92). I have demonstrated that rural students are thoroughly “othered” by academia. And, in one sense, this project is a reflection of that “othering” since it was my inability to understand rural students that provoked these research questions.

Throughout this study, I have developed two different motifs, suggesting that students can be seen as either strangers or guests. It is important to see that both definitions emphasize students’ otherness. In fact, the concepts of “stranger” and “guest” represent two fundamentally different ways that we can choose to interact with the other. Therefore, in suggesting that we can see our students as either strangers or guests, I am suggesting two fundamentally different approaches to the ethical problems created by the process of acculturation.

To approach our students as strangers is to emphasize their strangeness. Originating in the latin term “*extrāneus*, ” – it’s also the root of “extraneous” – the word emphasizes how out-of-place our students are. When we see someone as a stranger, we acknowledge that they are fundamentally incomprehensible. After all, who can say why strangers act as they do? The word also suggests social disempowerment since a stranger is, by definition, one who has not been accepted by the community. It’s important to note here that rural students and evangelical fundamentalists often position themselves as strangers. Writing about the “strangeness” of

fundamentalists, Warner notes that they “consider themselves an oppressed minority. In their view the dominant culture is one of a worldiness they have rejected, and bucking that trend comes, in some very real ways, with social stigmatization” (222). Similarly, rural students tend to position themselves as oppressed minorities who must protect their cultural heritage from the dominant culture. This is one reason why rural students who despise racism might still proudly display a Confederate flag bumper sticker. Similarly, it helps to explain the prevalence of “Southern Pride” t-shirts and memorabilia in Branson.

Regardless of how students position themselves, however, it is ultimately the instructor of each class who has the power to decide how he or she will choose to interact with students. In any fully articulated ethical system, this agency, the ability to determine how we treat the other, is foregrounded. If we accept this power, this responsibility, choosing to treat our students as guests, we will express it in at least three ways.

First, the concept of guesthood includes the idea that a guest comes from somewhere else. In this respect it differs significantly from the word “stranger,” which only suggests that a person is in the wrong place. A guest is presumed to be from somewhere. In this respect, the word implies students’ situatedness in another culture. Acknowledging their cultural differences, then, is one key to treating students like guests. If we fail to consider their primary culture, we miss the opportunity to learn from them, to imagine other ways of seeing the world. When we understand that students arrive in our classrooms as members of a fully-formed discourse community, we both acknowledge and honor their otherness. We can suggest this in the writing classroom by being curious about their cultures of origin and asking them why they interact with texts in the ways that they do.

Secondly, we treat our students like guests when we clearly and repeatedly articulate the tenets of academic discourse. When we welcome guests to our homes, it is normal to express our expectations in a thousand little ways. We might say, for example, “Breakfast will be at seven, and we usually have eggs and bacon.” This is not an act of violence or domination; it is an invitation to enter fully into the life of the family. In the same way, we treat students like guests when we explain the conventions of academic writing, inviting them to enter fully into the life of the classroom.

Finally, the concept of guesthood is predicated on an understanding that guests are necessarily “un-settled.” That is, they are uneasy because they have not settled in this place. The term implies that, in some sense, a guest is always occupying two worlds. We can honor our students’ “dual citizenship” when we acknowledge that it is difficult – both mechanically and epistemologically – to come to grips with the conventions of academic discourse. We also honor their unsettledness when we foreground the estrangement typically experienced by those who have adopted a new discourse community. After all, no one can be fully present in two worlds at once.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge that this unsettledness never quite goes away, and we are left with a sense that in gaining we have also lost. If we are honest with students, we will tell them this truth. This is the testimony of Richard Rodriguez, Michael Warner, and all who have left one community for another. Rather than simply replacing one world view with another, we find ourselves in the difficult and endless process of mediating between the two.

Wendall Berry depicts exactly this process in his novel *Jayber Crow*. Jayber, a young seminarian from a rural community, begins to experience a crisis of faith during his first year in

college as he repeatedly encounters inconsistencies in the Bible. He takes up the matter with his professor of New Testament Greek, "Old Grit," who suggests that this process of mediation will be Jayber's life work:

"You have been given questions to which you cannot be *given* answers. You will have to live them out -- perhaps a little at a time."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps."

"That could be a long time."

"I will tell you a further mystery," he said. "It may take longer." (54)

If we read this conversation as marking a point in Jayber's acculturation – a first effort to mediate between unexamined faith and a nascent critical sensibility – we see that the instructor honors Jayber's guesthood by acknowledging his unsettledness.

## Conclusion

Throughout this study I have suggested that I am a guest in the culture of the Missouri Ozarks as students from this region are guests in my class. In this respect, we share the characteristic unsettledness of all guests. That is, we are all residents (in different ways) of at least two worlds. This understanding leads to the acknowledgement of a certain tension. If we are honest, that tension is irresolvable. I'm never going to be a native Ozarkian, and my students

are never going to be native to the academic discourse community. We will always both be somewhere in between.

This in-between space, the only home of the guest, can be a rich and productive one, however. It is the place of the participant-observer. It is the place of the student. And, it is the place of the teacher. Our success in all of these roles is predicated on our ability to position the other as guest, and we can only do that by acknowledging the cultural situatedness of students, the way in which they come from somewhere. In that somewhere, we can assume that their beliefs and actions – the things that mark them as other in our community – would go without remark and that we would seem very odd indeed. Therefore, in a final ironic twist, we see that our ability to interact ethically and productively with the other rests on our ability to recognize our own otherness. That sense of self-otherness is as necessary for the ethnographer as it is for the teacher and student.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Questionnaire #1 Fall 2011**

1. Tell us a little bit about yourself. (How old are you? Where were you born? What was your home life like?)
2. Growing up, how would you describe your family's financial situation? Are your parents employed? Where?
3. How would you describe your family's religious or spiritual life?
4. How would you describe your personal political leanings?
5. Why did you choose to attend college? Did your parents attend college? What do you hope to get from the experience?
6. Has your family supported your decision to attend college? Why or why not?
7. How did you feel about being placed in a developmental writing section?
8. Do you think of reading and writing as being more masculine or more feminine activities? Why?

**Questionnaire #2 Spring 2012**

1. Are you getting what you hoped you would from your college experience?
2. Now that you're a year in, is your family more or less supportive of your decision to go to college?
3. Did the developmental writing sequence help you to become a better writer? How?
4. Have your personal beliefs changed in the last year? If so, how?
5. Have your career and academic goals changed in the last year? If so, how?
6. Did you feel that your writing instructors wanted to help you succeed?
7. Are you a different kind of thinker as a result of the writing instruction you've received?  
If so, how?
8. Do you think that reading and writing will be an important part of your life after college?

9. Have your college writing courses been better or worse than your high school writing courses? How?
  
10. Regarding your relationship with reading and writing: on a scale of 1-10, with 10 representing high enjoyment and 1 representing extreme dislike, how would you rate your feelings about writing? Reading?

## **Appendix B**

### **Preliminary Interview: Spring 2011**

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What sort of person are you?
2. What sort of people do you admire? Can you list some characteristics of a person you admire?
3. What stands out in your mind about your previous English classes?
4. Do you imagine that you'll become a different person as a result of your college coursework?
5. Are you looking forward to this semester's writing, or are you dreading it? Why?
6. Do you think that writing and reading will be important parts of your life after college?
7. Describe your personal belief system.
8. In your opinion, what should be the goals of a college writing class? What should you be required to learn?
9. Are you a strongly political person? If so, talk about your political beliefs.
10. Describe your career goals. What sort of job do you want to end up with? What's appealing about that sort of work?

### **Midway Interview: Fall 2011**

1. Has your current writing course been similar to what you expected?
2. Have you been satisfied with your progress through writing courses so far?
3. Do you feel that your instructor teaches in a way that helps you learn?
4. Discuss a few assignments that were particularly interesting or boring?
5. In your opinion, what makes an assignment successful?
6. Have your personal beliefs been challenged in the writing classroom? How?
7. What part of writing is most difficult for you?
8. What part of writing seems easiest?
9. Do you think that you have changed as a result of your college coursework? How?
10. Do you like your current writing instructor?

### **Final Interview: Spring 2012**

1. If you could change anything about the developmental writing courses you've taken, what would it be?
2. Do you think that you're more or less strongly connected to your family than you were a year ago?
3. Do you think that you're more or less strongly connected to the community in which you grew up than you were a year ago?
4. Do you think of reading and writing as being more masculine or more feminine activities? Why?
5. How has your writing improved over the last year?
6. In what areas do you feel that you still need improvement as a writer?

## Appendix C

Robert: “Ok. Interview on August twenty-ninth, 2011. Can you say your name?”

Jacob: “Jacob Faucett.”

Robert: “Jacob Faucett and Robert Griffith. Alright, here are the rules, Jacob. The rules are, I have some questions, but I really just want to visit. So if I run out of things to say, or you run out of things to say, we can ask questions. I would like to work through the questions, but I also really, uh, just want to visit and, you know, get to know each other and talk about school a little bit. Ok. So, let’s just start with a little background. You said you were a foster kid. Can you talk me through what does your life look like? Give me your quick life story.”

Jacob: “Uh, quick life story is, my foster, I became a foster kid at the age of being born.

*(Brief section not transcribed to protect student confidentiality.)*

Jacob: “At the age of two, my parents were divorced, and therefore through custody battles, we started in and out of care, my brother and I.”

Robert: “What’s your brother’s name?”

Jacob: “Uh, John.”

Robert: “Older or younger.”

Jacob: “He’s a year older than me.

Robert: “Ok.”

Jacob: “He’ll turn twenty-one this, this year. And, uh, so, in and out of custody battles, and at the age of ten, I went to live with my dad. He went to live with my mom, *(hesitates)* and then things didn’t go right with my dad, so I’ve been in and out of



custody ever since then too, and now I'm just in until I turn twenty-one, and then I'll just leave care and be on my own."

Robert: "Ok. Uh...you want to talk about what things didn't go right with your dad?"

Jacob: "Oh, well, being in different houses, like I was...different foster home...being in different...predominantly women. I mean a lot of single moms are foster parents, surprisingly enough to me. Uh, but, so I didn't have the same, uh, eye to eye. We didn't see eye to eye at all on quite a few issues and his being the dad..."

Robert: "Mm-hmm."

Jacob: "Uh, he would win of course, but I wouldn't be happy about it, but eventually, you know, he'd just get really mad. And I did something one time, and my punishment was to write the Ten Commandments. (*hesitates*) Which isn't bad, you know. A hundred times each and five hundred for the ones I'd broken. And so, I was like, no."

Robert: (*laughing*) "That's a lot of Ten Commandments."

Jacob: "That's a lot of writing, yeah. I got through the first two and then I was like, I'm done. And so, the day they were supposed to, you know, be due, like a homework assignment, and, uh, I ran away from home at the age of twelve, cause I didn't know what to do. And then I was in foster care until I was fifteen or sixteen and I went back to the..."

Robert: "So when you ran away from home, like, where'd you go? How did they find you again?"

Jacob: "I went to a church member's house. And I was like, oh, I'm just, you know, I don't remember what I said. Something stupid, like, I was going to ride my bike

to go see my grandma, who lives, like, an hour away, but I was going. Something dumb. And then when I went to church that night they found that I was reported missing, and so they took me to the police station. I was like, awe!”

Robert: “What kind of church?”

Jacob: “Uh, *(hesitates)* it was Pentecostal. Assembly of God. And so...”

Robert: “Here? Around here somewhere?”

Jacob: “No. This was up north. Wellsville, MO. By Colombia.”

Robert: “Ok.”

Jacob: “Which is why I’m a Mizzou fan.”

Robert: “Oh, fair enough.”

Jacob: *(laughing)* “Uh, so I went back, and I was in foster care. I went to three foster homes in a three-year period.”

Robert: “Mm-hmm.”

Jacob: “And so I went back home, and then we moved down to Branson.”

Robert: “Cause it didn’t work out with the foster parents, or...?”

Jacob: “No, it did, and then everything was going fine, and the system, DFS, Division of Family Services, said that I was able to go back home.”

Robert: “Right. So you were in foster...and then went back home and then...right.”

Jacob: “Mm-hmm.”

*(Interrupted by the server at the restaurant)*

Jacob: “And then at the age of, I don’t know, it wasn’t very long. I wasn’t even back home a year. I moved home.”

Robert: “Back home with your dad?”

Jacob: "Uh, by this time he married my step-mom, Sierra. Who also attends classes."

Robert: "Sierra Faucett?"

Jacob: "Yes."

Robert: "I know her."

Jacob: "Me too." (*laughing*)

Robert: "Fair enough."

Jacob: "And so, he married her when I was ten, too. Very fast. And anyway, I moved back home, we moved down to Branson. We down here in like, June, July, somewhere in there. I attended classes at Branson High School. I got a job at Kmart in November. I got fired in March for changing prices, and I just took for granted people I didn't even know. Finally enough, one of the people I changed it for is now my juvenile officer. Great!"

Robert: "So he owes you huh?"

Jacob: "Yeah, she owes me money."

Robert: "Why were you changing prices?"

Jacob: "Well, it was like, for the people who were digging in the bottom of their purse for pennies for diapers. And I was like, "awe, no." I felt bad for them. So I would just void the transaction and take, like, ten percent off or something – so it would be in their price range – and I would feel better about myself. (*laughing*)"

Robert: "Ok."

Jacob: "And then when the computer techs came up with a string of voids on my register, they were like, "What have you been doing?" Which, I got fired, so that said, it was March twenty-eighth I got fired. And that's a string of events that amounted

to April first, at two-thirty in the morning, I was in the back of a DFS car driving for WCCH in Norwood, MO, because my dad had punched me in the face and sent me into the other room about ten feet. Airmail. *(pause)* So, I was back in foster care, and I've been there ever since. We've tried visits, and they just don't work."

Robert: "What's your foster family's name?"

Jacob: "Uh, right now, it's Fred Patron."

Robert: "Do you have a foster, I don't know what you call a foster sibling."

Jacob: "Becky? Becky is taking classes at OTC."

Robert: "I know a Patron. I guess that's what made me think of it."

Jacob: "Becky is attending...*(unintelligible)* Uh, and then Alan's in high school. Owen and Jennifer are in grade school. So..."

Robert: "Good family?"

Jacob: "Yeah. Yeah. Good, good people. They's good people."

Robert: "Say what?"

Jacob: "They's good people."

Robert: "Good. And where do you live now, I mean, geographically?"

Jacob: "Over on Bee Creek."

Robert: "Ok. Good summary. Here's my life. My dad's a doctor. He was a doctor in practice in Indianapolis, hence the Colts. Uh, I lived there till I was eight or nine. He, uh, decided to run for office – lost, but he'd already sold his practice. When you sell a medical practice, you're not really selling a whole lot, cause you can just open up next door and everybody would just come back to you, you know?"

Jacob: “Mm-hmm.”

Robert: “So you have to agree to not open up shop within, like, a hundred miles of there or whatever the terms of the contract are. So he couldn’t be a doctor in Indianapolis anymore. He decided to join the Air Force. We went to England. I was homeschooled through all this, just because, well, partly for religious reasons, and partly because both my parents had been teachers. So they knew about school, and they thought they could do a better job. Then it worked out anyway, ‘cause when we moved overseas, we moved a lot. I lived in England for a while. I lived in Germany for a while. Uh, I’ve got four siblings. And, when it came time for me to pick a college, I didn’t really have any roots anywhere, but I knew a guy that had gone to this little private college in Arkansas. He said it was nice, so I went and visited there. I visited a bunch of places, and, like, there were pretty girls playing Frisbee, and I thought, “Yeah, I can go for this. Sure. It looks nice.”

Jacob: “Sure, dude.”

Robert: “I think I wanted a small town cause I’d lived in a lot of big cities in Europe, and I just wanted to settle down somewhere. Uh, I met my wife there. Uh, she wanted to sing. I wanted to go to grad school. So, we moved to Ozark, and I went to Missouri State for a while in Springfield, and she went to work at the Showboat, singing for a while. She still sings, and she’s done a bunch of shows in town. Uh, when I was at Missouri State, I started teaching at OTC a little bit to make extra money. After I got done...we didn’t like living in Ozark, ‘cause it felt like we were always between. Like, I went to Springfield; she went to Branson, but we didn’t live anywhere, so we decided to move to Branson when I was done with

Missouri State. And then I decided to go to Arkansas. I went to Arkansas for a couple years of classes. I just commuted. And, uh, got some classes at this little OTC center just to, kind of, make ends meet. When I got done with the classes at Arkansas, uh, I'd done well, and I'd done a good job teaching here, and they were looking for a new boss. So, I interviewed for that and got that position. So, for the last four years, I've been doing this. We built a house; had a couple kids. I have two kids now, a two and a half year old and a one year old – Georgia and Mercy. And we go to The River out in Forsyth for church, which is a cool place. And my wife sings, part time and raises the kids. I do this and I'm trying to finish up the last bit of research for the doctorate from Arkansas. So, that's my life, pretty much."

"Ok. Question number one. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What sort of person are you?"

Jacob: "A living person. I'm pretty good at that. Uh..."

Robert: "A survivor."

Jacob: "Yeah. I have a very unique sense of humor. A lot of people don't get it. So I wind up telling lame puns or something, and no one will laugh and I'll be cracking myself up in the corner. It's great!"

Robert: "I think that's pretty much the definition of being a nerd, by the way."

Jacob: "Yeah, nerd, dork – I hear them all."

Robert: "I like to watch people bowl, 'cause when they miss, it cracks me up. Like when someone just throws it straight into the gutter, it's just terrible and not even close – it kills me!"

Jacob: “If it’s like a grown person, yes, but if it’s a kid I’m like, “Awe, it’s a kid.” And you should not watch me bowl ‘cause you would not stop laughing. Well, last year on my birthday, I think I got, like a sixty-three.”

Robert: “So what sort of person are you? Not a bowler.”

Jacob: “Not a bowler.”

Robert: “Weird sense of humor.”

Jacob: “Sports fan.”

Robert: “Sports fan.”

Jacob: “Any sport, I’ll play it – except hockey. I can’t skate, but I do respect hockey players for their ability to skate. Go ninety miles an hour, stop and turn around – it’s crazy. But if it’s on a field, on anything I can walk or run on, I’ll do it. Not fast, but example? One day last year, I went to school all day, got out, played football in the yard with Isaac and then went to play basketball with Cal. That night Cal and B had an indoor soccer game. So I went to that, and I was going to support him, but it turned out the other team didn’t show up, and all they did was scrimmage. So, they asked if we wanted to play. I played that for an hour. Scored two goals.”

Robert: *(with a mouth full of food)* “Nice.”

Jacob: “I went home and I was, like, dog tired. I slept very good.”

Robert: “Would you say you were a people person?”

Jacob: “Not a stupid people person. I can deal with people. I can deal with tourists just fine ‘cause you meet them once, you be nice. If they’re rude, whatever, you

know? You get one mean, rude guy in, like, every fifty nice people. So it works.”

Robert: “You seem like, kind of, a people person to me. You certainly were friendly to the waiter.”

Jacob: “Yeah. He’s a good waiter.”

Robert: “Ok. What sort of people do you admire? Tell me about a person that you think, “Yeah, I’d like to be him. I’d like to grow into him.””

Jacob: *(pause)* “Not the entire person, but my dad, because, well, he’s my dad. So I admire him. I don’t model how he acts to certain situations, but some of the advice, you know, seeing him react in certain situations, it’s like, yeah, that’s how I want to do it. But mostly what I learned about parenting from my parents is how not to handle the situation.”

Robert: “Can you put a word on what it is that you do like about your dad? I mean, that you don’t like, but admire? Sounds like temper is the thing you would not want to model after him.”

Jacob: “I do have his temper. It’s great. Self-control is something I’m blessed with though. If I get mad, it’s very rarely. But, uh, just what he lives his life by – his ethics and his morals. I mean, yeah, when he gets mad, he blows gaskets bad, but when he doesn’t he has very, very good morals. He’s always kept me in church. I don’t think there was a Sunday we missed more than one in a row....shoot! Other than that, I mean, there’s not just one person I want to model myself after. It’s maybe because of me growing up everywhere under the sun and moving, like, once a year. So I haven’t concentrated on one figure. You know most people are



a fan of a sports figure, but I hadn't been into sports until two years ago 'cause my dad didn't like it. I took, so, "Dad doesn't like, so I don't like it." And then I started watching and playing a little bit and I thought, "Hey, this is fun!"

Robert: *(laughing)* "Yeah!"

Jacob: "That dude just got jacked!"

Robert: "Ok. Tell me a little bit more...if you don't have a specific person, tell me some, I don't know, like, character traits or certain personality qualities you'd like to develop."

Jacob: "Well, I'd like to be a little more sociable, 'cause I'm not all, like, out there, but I put myself in situations where I'm forced to be out there. Like right now with public speaking, I don't like talking in front of people I don't even know. I don't think anybody does. If they do, they're called...like, they go down in history. They're people like Martin Luther King and presidents. I think I could be a president. I think that'd be fun."

Robert: "I'll make a note in your file: Future president."

Jacob: "Heck yeah! I was asked what we want to do the other day, in one of our classes. It was, like, syllabus day. "What do you want to be?" "I want to be the president." "What do you really want to be?" "I want to be a music teacher and a pastor, but I want to be president." But uh, I don't know."

Robert: "Ok. Fair enough."

Jacob: "I model myself, kind of, you know, after my friends, you know, I've picked up very wisely."

Robert: "What do you look for in a friend?"

Jacob: “Trust. Loyalty. Compassion. Someone who knows right, ethics, morals. If they’re Christian, cool. If they’re not, it doesn’t matter. That’s where I come in or that’s where being a light counts. But I don’t want to find people who are going to drag me down. I want people who are going to tell me what I don’t want to hear but what I need to hear.”

Robert: “I hear compassion and honesty. Loyalty, yeah. Good, I like that. Uh, feels like I keep hearing faith in what you’re saying. Is your faith a big part of your life?”

Jacob: “Always has been. I was four years old, it’s crazy, from the first day I learned to tie my shoes. We were living down by the waterfront in Washington, MO. We lived on the Missouri River. There was the river, a set of train tracks, and then a little hill with woods on it, and then it was our house. And my mother had a new boyfriend, and she had a lot of those. She had a new one, and I didn’t like him at all. Something just wasn’t right about him.”

Robert: “So this is after they’d split up, and you are with your mom and her new boyfriend?”

Jacob: “Yeah. I didn’t sleep real easy a lot at nights, and then one night I was just dead asleep, and my brother and I shared a room. I don’t think I’ve ever had my own room. I still don’t have my own room. I share with a ten year old, but, uh, he woke me up. I was, like, “John, what are you waking me up for. I’m finally sleeping good!” And he pointed to the doorway and there was an angel standing there. Must have been 6’2,” 6’3”. So for people who question whether God exists, whether that exists – I can’t question it. So I accept it as fact, and I build upon it.”

Robert: "What did the angel look like, besides being big?"

Jacob: "He was like, six foot three. He wasn't, like, massive, but he was toned."

Robert: *(laughing)*

Jacob: "You know, he was white, and he stared..."

Robert: "It sounds like you're describing me." *(laughing heartily)*

Jacob: "Yeah, that got an eye roll."

*(to the waiter)* "Thank you, Mr. Mike."

Robert: "Note to recording: That got an eye roll."

Jacob: "Yeah, that got an eye roll."

*(Interrupted by the server at the restaurant)*

Robert: "Ok. Where were we?"

Jacob: "The angel."

Robert: "Angel. The angel that looks like me."

Jacob: "Yeaaaah. You don't carry a sword."

Robert: "Maybe I do and maybe I don't."

Jacob: *(laughing)*

Robert: "So did the angel do anything?"

Jacob: "He stared straight into the garage. Like, the way my room was set up, we had no door. We had a door, but it led to my mother's room, so we never went through it. And then there was an open door to the kitchen, and then an open door to the garage, and it was a little bitty room. It had a bed, a walkway, and a bed, and that's it. It didn't have dressers. That was all in the garage. But he just stared straight into the garage. So we were kids. We, like, walked through him, I guess

is what you'd call it. We just walked and he would disappear, and then we'd go through and he'd be there, and he would just straight look in the garage. It was cool."

Robert: "Did you go into the garage?"

Jacob: "Oh no. That freaked us out, man. It was dark in there. I never liked the garage when I had to sleep in there, shoot."

Robert: "You had to sleep in the garage?"

Jacob: "Yeah, we sometimes slept in the garage. I don't know why we didn't put the car in the garage, but..."

Robert: "Alright, moving on. Angels are interesting but sometime we have to talk about writing. Uh, what stands out in your mind about previous English classes?"

Jacob: *(sigh)* "Laziness."

Robert: "On your part or the teacher's part?"

Jacob: "Well, if I get interested in the subject...my part, definitely....if I get interested in the subject, I'll write pages on it – no problem. Freshman English, had a paper on Romeo and Juliet. I don't know why I was interested in that subject, but I knew the story, and I knew it good. There was, like, a really complicated question that most people were going to answer. It was an essay question, but their answers were, like, a page long. I wrote three pages front and back. I got an A."

Robert: *(mocking self-praise)* "I got an A."

Jacob: *(laughing)* "I was really interested in that, in explaining it. 'Cause, I felt what I did wasn't adequate enough. It was like, 'How is something related?' It was

complicated. It was an underlying question that no one noticed. I noticed, and I got an A.”

Robert: “Nice work.”

Jacob: “But if I’m interested in the subject, or I have a cool teacher like Mr. Prather – he’s cool. I liked the teacher in Branson, Mr. England. He was cool. Ms. Smith, she’s...”

Robert: “Mr. England?”

Jacob: “England. He’s old”

Robert: “Mr. Smith’s in Branson too?”

Jacob: “Ms. Smith. She was ok. She was a better person than she was English teacher. She worked for some kids, and for some kids she doesn’t. Like every Math teacher I’ve had, horrible teachers, except Mr. Warner. You know, he’s a Bears fan, so I can’t credit him, but horrible teachers, but great people. But, I don’t even know who I had for sophomore English. I don’t remember.”

Robert: “So far here, all you’ve had is Mr. Prather, right?”

Jacob: “Mm-hmm.”

Robert: “And that was in the spring?”

Jacob: “Yep, and I’m taking him again this fall.”

Robert: “Same class?”

Jacob: “No, I went from 050 to comp.”

Robert: “101? Good. So you passed. I think I got confused and thought you didn’t pass, ‘cause I looked you up a little earlier today and tried to...”

Jacob: “It said NC.”

- Robert: "But pass?"
- Jacob: "I don't even know what that means."
- Robert: "That means no credit and you got a "C." It means it's not a college level class but you got a "C" on it so you're ready for the college level English now."
- Jacob: "I thought it meant not completed, and I was, like, I know I completed his class."
- Robert: (*laughing*) "Stressful. Uh, yeah, so..."
- Jacob: "I purposefully chose Mr. Prather."
- Robert: "You purposefully chose him? Tell me what you like about him."
- Jacob: "One, he comes in with stupid stuff some days that's just hilarious, telling of human stupidity. But he doesn't, he doesn't just teach. He tries to connect with students. He goes, you know, "Ok, this works for some people and if I think the ratio..." Like, one of the ratios was three people in this class might get it. You know, looking at percentage wise. And he goes, "But for those three people, I'm going to do it." It was a visuals thing I think. You know, cause there's visual, audio and then the other type of learning."
- Robert: "Tactile or kinesthetic. Different people say it different ways."
- Jacob: "I don't know. You can do it any way, and I'm going to learn it. I'll read it in a book. You can show me. I don't care, except for mechanics. Mechanics has to be hands on. But so, he connected with the students. He tries to."
- Robert: "Good. Was there an assignment in his class that didn't go well?"
- Jacob: "Technically, no. Assignment I didn't do well on? Why? Cause I procrastinated. I'm a really bad procrastinator. Always have been."

- Robert: “Alright. He makes a big deal out of the writing process, huh? He talks a lot about what to do.”
- Jacob: “He talked about pre-writing.”
- Robert: “But you didn’t talk about the writing process in 050?”
- Jacob: “I’ve slept a lot since then.”
- Robert: “Fair enough.”
- Jacob: “Yeah, ‘cause I remember we started with a word, and then we went to a subject, and then a subject to a sentence to a paragraph to an essay and how the steps went along that. You know, how you had to form your topic sentence and...”
- Robert: “What’d you write your essay about?”
- Jacob: “The original one? I think it was, like, jobs in Branson or something. Finding a year-round job in Branson is a pain in the butt.”
- Robert: “Ok. Four: Do you imagine you’ll become a different person as a result of your college coursework? So you’re going to have all these classes, is that going to change you?”
- Jacob: *(interrupting)* “Hopefully I’ll become smarter.”
- Robert: “Ok.”
- Jacob: “But also, you know, I took Poli-Sci, and now I’m taking History with Mr. Brown, and I’m taking Sociology with Ms. Scarlett – I chose her as my Soc teacher, at least I chose her class ‘cause I like her. She’s a good teacher. But, uh...”
- Robert: “Have you had a bad teacher at OTC?”

Jacob: “I can say no. I didn’t see eye to eye with Mr. Garibaldi on a few things, but then again he got Biology, which isn’t the best subject for me ‘cause I think it’s dumb. I ace it, yes, without trying. It’s really basic. But uh, I don’t know about Ms. Davis yet. Then again, I don’t like public speaking, so she doesn’t start off on the best note.”

Robert: “Ah-ha! Fair enough. It’s not her fault. You have to do some public speaking in the public speaking class. You can’t really blame her for that.”

Jacob: “It’s not my fault I’m required to have it, geez! (*imitating a questioner*) ‘Why are you in this class?’ (*answering*) ‘Required.’”

Robert: “Ok. Here’s a question. It wasn’t on the list, I just thought of it.”

Jacob: “Ok.”

Robert: “We’ve got a list, kind of, of the kind of person you want to become, right – compassionate? Hopefully, I mean, you already see yourself as some of those things, but want to continue to grow in compassion, in honesty, in ethicality. You’d like to be a little more outgoing. Do you see your college coursework as playing a part in that? I mean, do you imagine your classes will make you more compassionate and honest and so forth?”

Jacob: “Well, by taking certain classes such as, Sociology or Poli-Sci or History –which is what I’m mainly focusing on – it forces you to think through different perspectives and look at the world through different lights, through different theories and such. Some are just off the wall and some are just, “Hey, this might actually make sense.” By doing that, it causes your brain to do more cognitive thinking.”



Robert: "Ok."

Jacob: "And so, by doing that, hopefully I'll become a better problem solver, or you know, more willing to see things through other peoples', during compromising situations and such."

Robert: "Ok. I'll buy that. Interesting. Number five: Are you looking forward to this semester's writing or are you dreading it? Why?"

Jacob: "'Cause I hate writing. I always have. I'll talk to you, blue in the face. Writing it down, no."

Robert: "Do you like it when you're doing it? Is it one of those things, some people have the experience, they dread it before they do it, but when they're actually doing it..."

Jacob: (*interrupting*) "But then during the middle of the essay it's not too bad, no. Yeah, I kind of enjoy writing about this, exactly. I just hate starting. I hate the introduction, I hate the conclusion."

Robert: "Ok. Uh, do you think that writing and reading will be important parts of your life after college?"

Jacob: "Yes."

Robert: "Yeah, well what sorts of writing and reading will you do?"

Jacob: "Well, reading would be, like, for me, library books or well, for my career, the careers I choose, uh, you don't teach reading music, but I'll teach reading music and I'll have to write, transpose. And then for my other career, you know, I'll read the Bible. It's a pretty good one and, you know, other Christian books which could be very lengthy, which I don't mind."

- Robert: “Which can be very what?”
- Jacob: “Very lengthy.”
- Robert: “But you don’t mind?”
- Jacob: “Yeah, I love reading.”
- Robert: “What do you read right now?”
- Jacob: “Right now. I don’t have a book. I’m waiting for a book to come in for history and then I’ll read that one. And I have a book I’m supposed to read but I can’t find it.”
- Robert: “For, like, a class you mean?”
- Jacob: “No, it’s not class required. Somebody’s saying, ‘You need to read this,’ and me being, like, ‘yeah, ok, sure.’
- Robert: “What book is it?”
- Jacob: “*Heaven is Real.*”
- Robert: “It’s at Wal-Mart, dude! (*laughing*) You can find it everywhere! I think my wife has a copy.”
- Jacob: “I think we have a copy, is the sad thing! I think Grandma Linda brought it with her when she visited, and she didn’t take it back.”
- Robert: “So you said you like library books. What kind of books would you get from the library?”
- Jacob: “Oh, I was always, when I was growing up, it was always science fiction. Books like, *Aliens Ate My Homework*, I loved those books. Mainly because the sci-fi, you know, it’s new stuff – stuff nobody’s thought of. Crazy like, teleportation. Crazy, but then again, back in the 1830s, that’s crazy.”

Robert: “Ok. Describe your personal belief system.”

Jacob: “Like, religion-wise, or what?”

Robert: “Sure.”

*(long pause)*

Robert: “If you’re going to be a pastor, you gotta work out the answer to this question.”

Jacob: “No, no. I know the answer, it’s just, it’s a different question. You know, it’s not what I get asked every day, so it’s different. It’s caused me to think a little bit. My belief system is it’s not so much a religion than a relationship. It’s not so much as a label, Christianity’s not a label; it’s a lifestyle. It’s how you live. It’s how you treat others. It’s how you act. It’s how you don’t talk behind people’s backs or gossip. *(emphatically)* I can’t stand gossip, and my little sister is a senior in high school. She does it non-stop. She’s president of the drama club, and so drama’s everywhere.”

Robert: *(laughing)*

Jacob: “Oh my gosh, I can’t wait till she goes to college.”

Robert: “This is your little foster sister?”

Jacob: “Aw, she’s, yeah...So, I’m the only foster kid there, but she’s just my sister. They...”

Robert: *(interrupting)* “She’s your...”

Jacob: *(finishing his sentence)* “...live there.”

Robert: “You said you imagine you’ll stay close to this foster family, the Patron family.”

Jacob: “Well, because I’ve networked here. A big word, I like it. But no, I’ve come into this family; I knew them for two years before I lived with them because I lived in

another foster home that was in Reeds Springs. We attended the same church, Tri-Lakes, by the Kirby Theater.

Robert: "Uh-huh."

Jacob: "And so, I knew them. They were my respite care providers, which is when foster parents get a break, and you go to someone else's house, and you just sleep or whatever. And so, Charlie and Josie would save their days up, and then once a year, they'd go on vacation, and they'd drop us off there for a week or two. During the fourth of July, or...last week of June or first week of July. But uh, and so, I've learned I'd become friends with their friends, except one, and uh, we're ok. They're friends, they're good friends with the Blaskins, and so I got a job working for Bruce Blaskin, and I'm dating his daughter. Yes!"

Robert: "Who's Bruce Blaskin?"

Jacob: "Uh, he is, he is my boss. He was a deacon at the church, and he stepped down just because he didn't want to do it anymore. It was like, "I just don't want to do this anymore." He's a good friend, confidant, which becomes really awkward at certain moments. But uh..."

Robert: "Does he have a job?"

Jacob: "He's my boss. He runs the (*unintelligible*) place for assisted living."

Robert: "Sweet."

Jacob: "So, I've become good friends with them. Good friends with the Smiths. You know, anybody they associate with, I am now associated with them. I'll eat this later."

Robert: “Sure, finish it later. Uh, so if I was summarizing your personal belief system, it would be Christian, but Christian in a way that’s not so much, well...”

Jacob: “A Bible-thumper? *(laughing)* Like, you’re going to hell! I don’t go pointing at people and say they’re going to hell very often! I don’t think I’ve ever actually done it, ever, and meant it. It was like when you’re five on the playground, and someone steals your field or something.”

Robert: “Ok. I like it. Why a pastor? Why do you want to be a pastor?”

Jacob: “I always, always have known I wanted to be a pastor. I mean, it’s just one of those things I can...I love music, which is why I want to go be a music teacher. And my ideal job is at our church right now, as Pastor Richard Lauren. And uh, he’s, he’s uh, technically a pastor but he’s also our choir director and music leader.”

*(Interrupted by the server at the restaurant again)*

Jacob: “So, I’ve always just, when I’m reading the Bible, like, literally sermons will pop in my head. Like, I can preach this and this and this, connecting these verses, and so sometimes I write them down, and sometimes I don’t.”

Robert: “Ok. On a different note, in your opinion, what should be the goals of a college writing class, and what should you be required to learn?”

Jacob: “Well, coming into a college level writing class, you should already know the basic writing steps and how to write an essay or resume or whatever you’re going to be working on. But a goal of a college writing class should not be so much to teach you those things, but to strengthen your abilities in them. To make you better than what you were, but to push you. ‘Cause if you let somebody, it’s

human behavior, if you just let somebody say, 'Ok, I'm this good,' then they'll stay that good. So at college level they need to push you where you think you can't do it till you break, pretty much. And then you'll get it, or you'll fall behind, but when you fall behind, your instructor should be there to say, 'Ok, this is what you need to work on. This is why you're falling behind. Ok, maybe you're spending too much time on this. You need to spend time on your studies, you know, priorities.'"

Robert: "Ok. If you talked about the stuff you're supposed to know already and the stuff you're supposed to learn now, can you split those up for me a little? What stuff are you supposed to know already?"

Jacob: "Uh, in high school, you learn, you're supposed to know how to write, and, I mean, at least print hopefully."

Robert: "You mean, like, penmanship?"

Jacob: "Well, yeah. Of course I have horrible penmanship. That's why I type things. It looks like chicken scratch. I could be a doctor. I could pull it off." (*laughing*)

Robert: "All you have to say is, 'I concur.'"

Jacob: (*laughing*)

Robert: "Just keep saying that. 'I concur.' Eventually you'll become a doctor. Trust me, my father's a doctor, and I slept at a Holiday Express. Ok, so penmanship. Are there other things you would put on a list, that in a college class you should already know? You should know how to do that."

- Jacob: "Yeah. You should know how to write an essay. You should know how to write pretty much anything the teacher says before. You've done research papers. You've done resumes. I mean..."
- Robert: "So you're talking about, you should know how that kind of piece goes together?"
- Jacob: "You should know how it flows."
- Robert: "Ok."
- Jacob: "You know, intro, conclusion, body."
- Robert: "Organization."
- Jacob: "Yeah, organization is a big key. You want your paper to flow. In college, it's not so much about teaching you new things as refining what you know to make you better. You know, maybe your flow isn't right. I can't, I can't flow a paper very well at all. I have people write it. *(laughing)* Not write it."
- Robert: "You don't have people write your papers."
- Jacob: "I have people proof read it."
- Robert: "Oh, ok, now you change your story."
- Jacob: *(laughing)* "That's right. I have people write my papers."
- Robert: "Says the pastor."
- Jacob: *(laughing still)* "That sounds horrible! I was going to make a joke, but I'll save it. So I can't flow very well. I'll have paragraphs, but I'll have somebody be like, 'Well, if you put this here, and then you talked about this again down here, it would flow a lot better, and change your wording here.' You know, go through with a giant red pen. Fix my paper, and then I rewrite it. And it doesn't flow. I can't. I'll sit at a piece of blank paper for forever, looking at it, because I don't

know how to start it. Or I'll go through, and I'll start it in my head, and I'll write it down. I'll be like, 'Well, that doesn't sound right, that wasn't where I'm going to.' So I'll throw it away. Like Wednesday, I have a speech due. I haven't even started."

Robert: "You haven't started your speech due on Wednesday?"

Jacob: "It's an icebreaker speech. It's all about me, and so I have plenty of research."

Robert: "Oh ok."

Jacob: "Already done. I did my research."

Robert: "So, there's not new skills to learn in college, in your opinion. You're just developing skills you already should have learned."

Jacob: "Mm-hmm."

Robert: "Ok."

Jacob: "Increasing your ratings."

Robert: "Who's rating you?"

Jacob: "Well, uh, yourself. I mean, I'm kind of an average writer I suppose. Kind of like the average college student writer. You know, I procrastinate a little bit, a little too long sometimes. Then you turn this paper in, you're like, maybe he'll be nice and you get a "D" or worse." (*laughing*)

Robert: "Do you feel smart?"

Jacob: "On writing-wise or just in general?"



- Robert: "Just in general."
- Jacob: "Yeah, I know I'm intelligent. I know I'm smart."
- Robert: "Fair enough, but writing-wise do you feel smart?"
- Jacob: "I have a wide vocabulary. But, with that, like I said, I can talk your ear off, but writing it down – totally different story. Because when I write it, I read it, and when I read it, I'm like, 'That doesn't ... it doesn't say what I want to say. That's not how I want to say it.' So I'll sit there for 30 minutes finishing two sentences – trying to get them to flow right."
- Robert: "Yeah."
- Jacob: "I'm horrible at it. But now, if I free write, I can just write, you know, for eight, ten minutes non-stop. One, my hand hurts really bad, but two, I have a paper that I can tweak."
- Robert: "So for you, discussion of writing process, and how to be faster and more efficient about it, could be super helpful, sounds like."
- Jacob: "Mm-hmm."
- Robert: "Good. Are you a strongly political person?"
- Jacob: "Mm-hmm."
- Robert: "Ok, talk about that."
- Jacob: "My (*mispronouncing*) political, (*correcting*) my political beliefs?"
- Robert: "Mm-hmm."
- Jacob: "Ok. I don't vote so much on party as I do issues, but I mainly vote Republican, just because of the abortion issue on the Democratic ticket. If there would be a

Democrat who would say, 'No abortion,' then I would probably vote for that guy. But being..."

Robert: "What are the other issues besides abortion?"

Jacob: "The economy. Everybody says, everybody talks. I don't stand, I don't like how presidents make promises. I cannot stand that! Because there's no way he can fulfill a promise on his own. 'I will make the law, blah, blah, blah, blah.' You don't make the laws, you dummy. But..."

Robert: "Alright. I like that."

Jacob: "But I try and vote based on issues and not party. I try to really be not biased when I listen to presidential debates. And I'm actually one of the guys that goes and does his research before he votes. Instead of, 'What's prop B? I'll vote yes on it.'

Robert: "'B' is one of my favorite letters. Yes. Yeah, uh, ok. So you're an issue voter, not a party voter, and your two issues are basically abortion and the economy?"

Jacob: "Economy, military's a big one because I'm very patriotic, and right now I'd be in service if I could, but I'm not allowed to."

Robert: "Why?"

Jacob: "Color blind, can't smell, flatfoot..."

Robert: *(laughing)* "You're just a big reject, huh?"

Jacob: "Flatfoot, had asthma when I was little. That doesn't look good on a ticket. I took anti-depressing meds when I was twelve to fifteen. I had a really rough patch there. Plus ADHD meds. I'm ADHD as can be. It's bad some days. And,

uh, I used to take a sleep aid so....none of that looks good to a guy going, ‘Who wants to go into...’”

Robert: “Who should we give the weapons to?” *(laughing)*

Jacob: *(laughing)* “That’s right. ADHD guy. Squirrel! *(makes gun-fire noise while laughing)* ‘Where’s your teammate?’”

Robert: *(laughing)* “I don’t think they call them teammates in the military – just for future reference.”

Jacob: *(laughing)*

Robert: “Alright, well, that covers my ten questions.”

## Appendix D

Robert A. Griffith  
English 101 401  
01/23/12

### Project #1 – The Review

**Due Dates:**    **Rough Draft – January 30<sup>th</sup>**  
                      **Final Draft – February 1<sup>st</sup>**

For your first assignment of the semester, I have asked you to review something. Your review should analyze some product or service with the goal of evaluating its worth. You may choose to review almost anything, but some topics will lend themselves more easily to the process than others. Nevertheless, you are free to choose – so choose wisely. Although your review could be organized in many different ways, here are a few elements most reviews will incorporate:

1. The introduction to your review should engage the reader immediately with some sort of attention-getting device. It should also establish your authority as a reviewer by listing your expertise or experience. Finally, your introduction must develop a list of criteria around which your review will be organized. This list must be carefully chosen to reflect your audience's actual priorities.
2. The body of your essay will be organized around these criteria. Each paragraph should be carefully unified around a single criterion, filled with detailed analysis, and smoothly integrated into its neighbors. These body paragraphs will serve to justify your conclusions.
3. After the introduction and body, your essay should include a conclusion which either states or restates your evaluation. A review must include some sense of judgment. Is the product or service good or bad? Worth the money or overpriced? I would prefer that your evaluation, however, be more nuanced than a simple "it's great" or "it stinks" verdict. In real life, bad things have some good qualities and good things have flaws – try to grapple with the complexity of a real product or service rather than praising or panning.
4. Once you have drafted your conclusion, you've created a review. Don't forget that the writing process is not complete after you have a complete draft. Think carefully about techniques or approaches that may help you to revise and edit your review.

Your paper should be approximately 3 pages long, and it is worth 10% of your overall grade. Don't hesitate to call or email me for additional assistance.

Robert A. Griffith  
 English 101 401  
 02/06/12

### **Project #2 – The Comparison**

**Due Dates: Complete Rough Draft – February 13<sup>th</sup>**  
**Final Draft – February 15<sup>th</sup>**

Your second writing project of this semester, the comparison, will build on the skills you have developed while writing the first. The comparison, of course, is much like the review except that it attempts to evaluate several different similar things. There are a number of different ways to organize this piece (we've discussed several of them in class) but all comparisons must, by definition, include several key elements. Here are a few suggestions that may help you along the way:

1. Your introduction should engage the audience, establish your authority on the subject matter, list the products or services you will be comparing, and establish the criteria you will be using to evaluate each product or service.
2. At some point, you may need to provide your audience with a justification for the ways in which you have limited your comparison. For example, you can't compare every restaurant in Branson, but you might be able to compare every fast food joint on Highway 76. Give your readers a reason for the choices you've made.
3. When selecting criteria, think carefully and realistically about what makes a product of this sort good. Who is your audience? What information will help them make the right choice?
4. You may choose to organize your piece in any fashion, but the two most common patterns include organizing by product or by criteria.
5. After the introduction and body, your essay should include a conclusion which either states or restates your evaluation. A comparison must include some sense of judgment. Is each product or service good or bad? Worth the money or overpriced? I would prefer that your evaluation, however, be more nuanced than a simple "it's great" or "it sucks" verdict. In real life, bad things have some good qualities and good things have flaws – try to grapple with the complexity of a real product or service rather than praising or panning.
6. Once you've completed your conclusion, you've drafted a comparison. Remember, however, that the writing process isn't completed until you've spent some time editing and revising your work. Try to learn from my comments on your first essay. What sorts of weaknesses did your work display on that first essay and what can you do to improve?

Your paper should be approximately five pages long, and it is worth 10% of your overall grade. Don't hesitate to call or email me for additional assistance.

ENG 101 401  
02/14/12  
Essay #3 Guidelines

### Project #3 -- Summary

The third major project of your composition semester is designed to help you acquire a crucial (but under-taught) academic skill: summarization. Once you've learned to smoothly compress others' ideas and incorporate them in your own writing, you'll find that writing research papers is much easier. After all, making a useful research paper is a bit like creating a collage in that you are creating something new and original by selecting and assembling others' creative work. If we can extend this metaphor a bit, imagine how useful the ability to resize photos is when creating a collage – that's what summarization is like. You've got to be able to change the size and shape of the ideas you're working with if you're going to be able to create something that is useful and artistically pleasing.

Every time you create a summary, you'll need to do it a little differently, even if you're summarizing the same thing repeatedly. Let me explain: If I was summarizing Tolstoy's War and Peace for a small child, I might just say a few words. On the other hand, If was writing a book about his greatest novels, I'd probably need at least a chapter or two about War and Peace since it's his most famous work. With that in mind, this project will require you to create three different documents: A one-page summary of the article, a one-paragraph summary of the article, and a one-sentence summary of the article.

Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind while you're working:

1. Don't begin writing a summary until you have completely read and understood the article. If you attempt to write while you're reading, your summary will tend to be unbalanced, giving greater weight to ideas that come earlier in the article and neglecting those near the end.
2. When you begin writing, be careful to include the original author's name and the title of the piece. Ideally, this information should be very near the beginning.
3. The organizational structure of the piece can provide you with some clues about how best to summarize. Your summary will often mimic the shape of the piece it is based upon. This is even true of your one-sentence summary since (as we have learned) one sentence can contain a number of clauses.
4. Be careful not to insert editorial comments. By that, I mean that your responsibility is to accurately condense the article's argument – not to comment on or criticize it.

Although this assignment doesn't require you to produce as great a volume of text as our other assignments, don't underestimate how difficult it can be. As always, your major projects are worth 100 points, and I will grade them and return them before your next assignment is due.

ENG 101 401  
Mr. Griffith  
03/5/12

### **Project #4 – Summary of a Controversy**

Your fourth major project for this course should help you to develop skills that will allow you to write much more convincing research papers. Since students often develop an argumentative thesis without fully understanding every side of an issue, I have decided to separate these two steps by forcing you to research before taking a stance. Unlike other assignments in this course, this essay should not express your opinion. Instead, I simply want you to summarize all the sides of a controversy. In order to do this well, you'll need to invest a great deal of time in serious research. Since I have something very specific in mind for this piece, it is important that you follow these guidelines carefully:

1. Your introduction should introduce the controversy and explain its significance. Why does anyone care? What effect does this controversy have on our everyday lives? In the last sentence or two of your introduction, include a sentence that outlines the rest of your piece.
2. In the body of your piece you will need to summarize **all** stances towards the issue. Be careful to avoid two-sided thinking, and try to make sure that you are presenting all sides fairly and in equivalent detail. Your research will be vitally important here since any lack of knowledge will be immediately obvious. Make sure that you understand how to quote and paraphrase authors and follow all MLA citation procedures. Also, you will be graded, in part, on the thoroughness of your research, so it is important to find the best possible sources.
3. The conclusion of your essay should briefly review all the stances you have covered, remind readers of the significance of your chosen topic, and close gracefully. Here, more than ever, you will have to be particularly careful not to take a side. Remember that the purpose of this piece is to present all the facets of a controversy for your readers.
4. Your essay will need to include a complete and correct works cited page.

You should find that the research process is more important and more difficult for this piece than the actual construction of the document. Be prepared to spend a good bit of time browsing and sorting through articles and books. Your final essay should include at least five pages of text and a works cited page.

ENG 101 401  
Mr. Griffith  
03/28/12

### **Project #5 – Formal Argument**

Hopefully, you are beginning to realize that all of the major projects you have been asked to complete this semester have been deliberately sequenced. When planning this semester, I arranged the first four projects to equip you to write the academic research paper. This argumentative paper is the foundational document of traditional scholarship. That's why it has become customary to assign a "term paper" in undergraduate courses.

Unfortunately, I don't believe that most high school educations prepare you to write a useful research paper. Instead, most students have spent a great deal of time creating "reports" that simply summarize an issue or "rants" that are too intellectually immature to carefully consider all sides of an argument.

With that in mind, I have tried to prepare you for this fifth assignment by asking you to develop a supported opinion in your first and second essays. The third essay taught you the skill of summarization. After that, in the fourth essay of the semester, I asked you to research a topic, present all sides of the issue fairly, and refrain from stating your own opinion. Now, I'll ask you to apply all those skills to your fifth project by developing an argumentative research paper.

To write this fifth paper, you should take your fourth project as a starting point, and simply develop an argument based on the controversy that you have summarized. Your argument should not be as broad as the summary of a controversy. You can't argue in favor of (or against) anti-intellectualism; it's simply too large a subject to allow for a useful argument. Instead, explore a subtopic. For example, you might argue for a parenting technique that you feel allows children to develop intellectually in a healthy way. You might argue about politics. Or, you might even choose to argue about regional bias in anti-intellectual theory. Find the bit of argument that interests you most.

You may include entire sections of your fourth essay, but they will probably need to be reworked so that the fifth essay feels like a cohesive whole. Theoretically, you have done some solid groundwork for this piece by researching the topic, developing a works cited page, and grappling with all the arguments and rebuttals.

Your research paper should be at least eight pages long, and it must also include a works cited page. This is a difficult assignment, so please ask if you need help.

**Rough Draft Due:**                      **April 4<sup>th</sup>**  
**Final Draft Due:**                      **April 9<sup>th</sup>**



English 101 401  
Mr. Griffith  
04/17/12

### **Project #6 – The Reflection**

It is with some relief (I'm sure that it is shared) that I announce the final assignment of the semester...a reflective essay. Since we're nearing the end of the semester, it's an appropriate time to look back on what we've learned. I have tried to structure the assignments this semester so that, taken as a whole, they have served to introduce you to the demands of academic writing. With that in mind, I'd like you to explore your growing understanding of academic discourse. What have you learned about the way that you're expected to read and/or write in your college courses? How do these expectations differ from the ways you've written and/or read in the past? Since I want you to feel free to explore and develop your ideas, I won't suggest a specific strategy for organizing this piece. Instead, a few tips:

1. Since this piece reflects on your own experience, a more informal, personal, or colloquial tone is suitable. You shouldn't feel any need to "dress up" your language. Be careful, however, not to let your writing become sloppy. Try to develop a voice that is casual but precise.
2. Exploratory writing sometimes requires a more fluid writing process than argumentative writing. You may find that free writing is a productive way to begin developing your thoughts. Make sure that you don't submit a free write, however. Once you've determined the direction of your piece, you'll need to revise carefully for unity.
3. If they come to you, suggestions about how I might improve the structure or substance of this course are welcome. I've made a real effort to provide you with substantive feedback on your writing throughout the semester. If you choose to return the favor by providing feedback about my teaching, I'd be grateful.
4. You may find that your conclusion is less certain and more speculative in this piece than in your previous work. Since the goal of the piece is to explore this semester's learning rather than convince your readers of a claim, a more speculative conclusion might be suitable.

As we near the end of our semester together, I am grateful for the way that you've participated wholeheartedly in this learning experiment. I hope you found the experience valuable, and I believe that you are well-prepared for future academic writing assignments. Thanks.

Rough Draft Due: April 25<sup>th</sup>  
Final Draft Due: April 30<sup>th</sup>